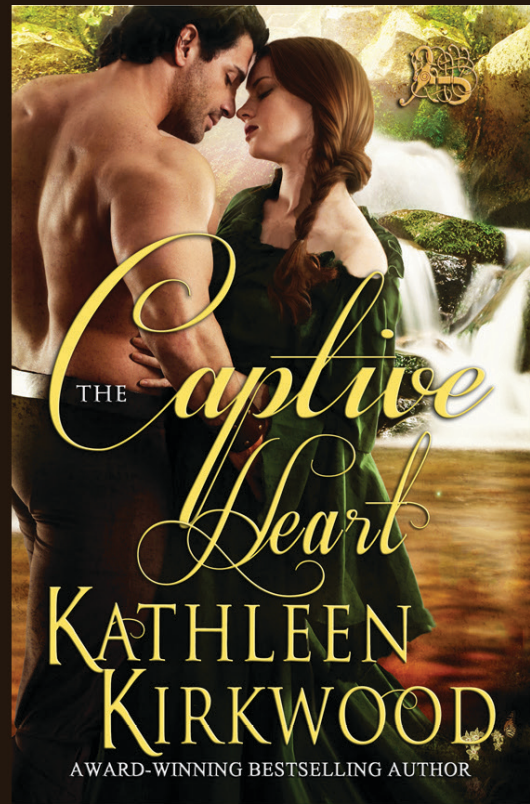
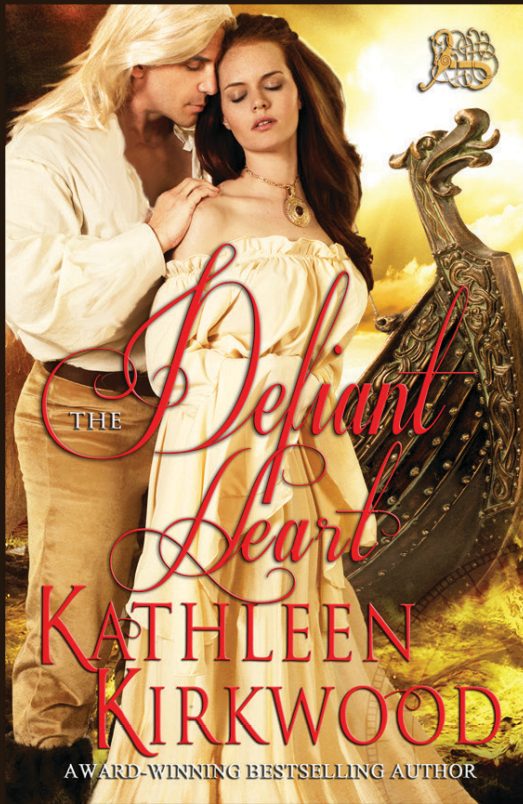
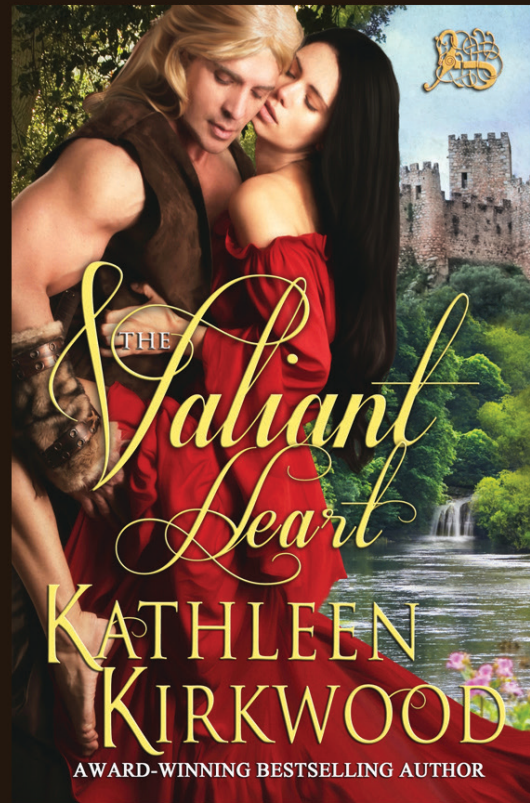


*Kathleen
Kirkwood*
Sampler
#2



Kathleen Kirkwood Sampler #2

This Sampler contains:

The Prologue and the first three chapters of *The Valiant Heart*,

The Prologue and first five chapters of *The Defiant Heart*,

The Prologue and first three chapters of *The Captive Heart*.

Table of Contents

Kathleen Kirkwood Sampler #2

The Valiant Heart

Dedication
Author's Notes
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
The Story Continues!

The Defiant Heart

Dedication
Author's Appreciation
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
The Story Continues!

The Captive Heart

Dedication
Author's Appreciation
Author's Note
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
The Story Continues!

Author Biography
Also Available
Coming in Late 2013

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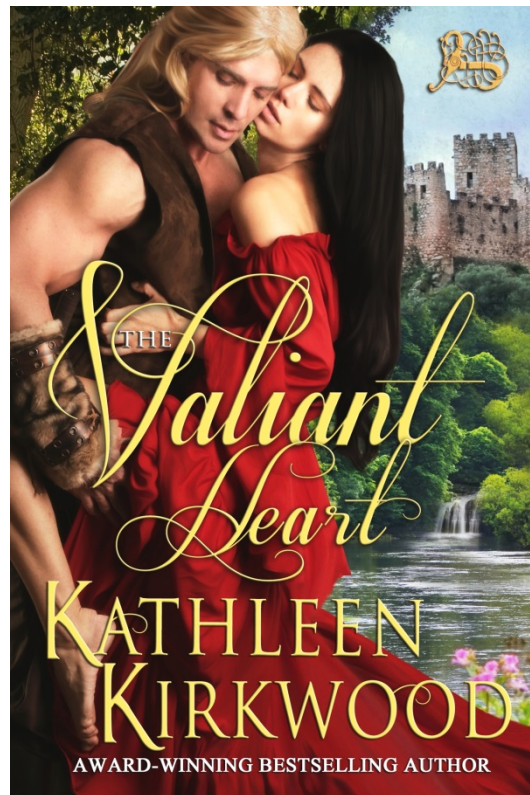
The Valiant Heart

By

Anita Gordon

Writing as

Kathleen Kirkwood



Dedication

For my husband Mark.
Your unwavering support and unbounded
patience enabled me to reach for the stars
and fulfill my dreams.

"Through The Years," I'm still loving you.

Author's Notes

The language of the ninth century Norsemen is preserved and spoken today in Iceland. "Old Norse" (*Íslensk*) has changed so little through the millennium that school children can read the *Eddas* and sagas in their original form. Though *Íslensk* was handed down from mainly Norwegian colonizers, at the time of the settlements Scandinavians spoke easily among themselves, their dialects being a variation of an original tongue. For these reasons and with few exceptions, I have used Icelandic (*Íslensk*) throughout the book, feeling it to be a more authentic usage for my Danish-born Norsemen than modern Danish. The term *viking*, a relatively recent word, is avoided altogether. My special thanks go to Mr. Jón Sigurdsson who assisted me in translating the various dialogues.

Note on pronunciation: the character "ð" is pronounced like the th-sound in "the"; "þ" is pronounced like the th-sound in "thin"; and "æ" is pronounced "i" as in "like."

Normandy and its "dukes": In 911 A.D. the Frankish king granted the Norse chieftain, Rollo, lands and titles on condition he and his men receive Christian baptism and protect the kingdom from their marauding kinsmen. Rollo honored this agreement but continued to enlarge his new domain at the expense of his neighbors, claiming their lands along with their varied titles— 'count' and 'marquis' named among them. Although the first Norman rulers did not yet bear the title of "duke," nor was Normandy yet deemed a "duchy," historians have found it more practical and less confusing to refer to them as such, recognizing Rollo as the first Duke of Normandy. I have followed that convention in this book.

Danish or Norwegian? – Rollo's origins are lost in the mists of time, still they continue to give rise to lively debate even today. Was he Danish or Norwegian? Rollo's grandson, Richard I (Normandy's third duke), summoned Dudo, dean of the collegiate church of Saint-Quentin, to his court shortly after 987 and tasked him with writing the history of Normandy. Dudo's writings, though not without criticism, are the earliest accounts that survive of the first Norman dukes. "Rollo," he tells us, was the Latinized version of "Hrolf" (sometimes written as "Rolf"), given at the time of Rollo's baptism. Dudo identifies him as being of the *Dani* (Danes). On the other hand, Icelandic sagas written several centuries later, claim Hrolf to be the son of a Norwegian *jarl* who fled his homeland for Scotland in the early 900s and later made his way to Francia via Iceland and England. The Norman Rollo/Hrolf is glimpsed in one historical record during his failed attack on Chartres in 911. He commanded a large force, mainly of Danes with some Anglo-Saxon mercenaries. After sifting through numerous arguments on the matter of Rollo's origins, I have decided to follow Dudo, giving Rollo a Danish origin—the same as his men. This may disappoint supporters for a Norwegian "Hrolf," but short of new revelations, we simply don't know. For further discussion on this, see *THE NORMANS*, by François Neveux (translated by Howard Curtis).

Prologue

Valsemé, France, 912 A.D.

The tall blond Norseman did not move as the Frankish emissaries quit the hall. Not until the great oaken door groaned shut behind them. Then, in two long strides, he mounted the dais and slammed his hands down full force on the table in front of him. His steel-blue eyes locked with a second pair that perfectly matched his own.

"Surely you do not intend to accept their offer."

"Calm yourself, Rurik." The older man settled back in the carved chair and emptied his drinking horn. "There are advantages to be gained with such a match."

"I tell you it reeks fair full of devilry."

Gruel Atli wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then squinted up from beneath a sagging lid.

"Does it trouble you that I would take a wife so soon after your mother's death?"

"*Nei.*" Rurik released a long breath as he straightened to his full height. "But the king was quick enough to unearth this heiress and foist her upon you. She is probably a dragon of a woman, ancient and diseased. Why else would they shut her away for nearly a decade?"

Atli threw back his head and roared with laughter. "'Tis a Christian holy house, Rurik. Beaumanoir's daughter dwells in cloister at the Abbey of Levroux." He wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "Ah, my son, you have been too long at sea."

Rurik grunted and crossed his arms over his chest. "Mayhap. But I know much of dealings, fair and foul. The king's terms are as transparent as they are unpalatable. What is to be gained by wedding Valsemé's displaced heiress? The barony is yours now."

Atli rose at that and beckoned Rurik to the narrow window of the keep.

'Tis a year past that I stood with Rollo at the river St.-Clair-sur-Epte when King Charles bestowed on him this fiefdom." He cast an eye upon his son. "Of course, we already controlled these lands through conquest, but Charles is shrewd. In exchange for our fealty, he granted us a homeland, buying himself a watchdog in the bargain to guard against those who would ravage his kingdom." Atli cracked a smile "Especially our own kind.

"Behold. Valsemé." He gestured toward the gently rolling contours of his domain. "Her good rich soil lies beneath our hands like a ready woman, waiting for man to plow her tender loins and plant his seed deep within." He brought his fist down against the stone sash. "But we be too few to do the deed. Charles drains me for his endless campaigns while time grows short. The land must be cultivated, and soon, if our storehouses are to stand full next winter. Most of the villeins fled at our coming, and I sorely need them back." He vented his frustration against the ledge once more, then pushed himself away and crossed to the dais.

"Do you know what these Franks call us? *Normanni.* Spring we of Danmark, Norge, Sverige, Zealand . . . it matters not. To them we are one and the same—Northmen—and they tremble before us. While that is to our advantage upon the battlefield, here 'tis an accursed burden."

Snatching up a cup and flagon of wine, he filled the vessel to its rim. "This heiress may prove the key," Atli rumbled, then tossed the contents down his throat. "Valsemé's villeins were fiercely loyal to Richard Beaumanoir while he lived. His daughter is perfect bait to lure them home."

Rurik frowned. "Still, why would she agree to such a union? Surely 'tis bitter gall that her titles and holdings are forfeit. Perchance she desires only to slip a bit of cold steel between your ribs as she warms your bed."

Atli shrugged broadly, unconcerned. "Evidently, the woman is eager to recover her lands and

position."

"Too eager and for her own gain, I'll wager." Rurik cocked a brow. " 'Twould take little time to journey by ship to Levroux and observe this bride firsthand. I could be back in a trice."

Atli held Rurik's gaze for several moments before he yielded. "Very well, but send your *broðir* in your stead. I have another task in mind for you." Refilling the cup, he offered it to his son. "And do not worry overlong on these terms the king has set. The Franks are not so clever as they think."

Atli barked laughter at some unspoken thought and pressed the flagon to his lips.

Levroux, France

'Tis a weed," Brienne protested as she considered the spindly plant dangling from her friend's hand.

"Nay, mugwort," Aleth insisted good-naturedly, "and a prize for Sister Ursuline's collection. 'Tis a powerful medicant, you know."

Brienne sighed and smiled indulgently. "Are all the good sister's lessons for naught? Mugwort does not grow here in the forest, dear Aleth. 'Tis but a weed."

"We shall see. Sister will know the truth of it."

"Aye, she will. And if you're ever to be a healer, you must learn to identify these herbs properly."

Aleth laughed. "I have. 'Tis mugwort!" she proclaimed with finality and deposited the wilting greens in the basket.

Brienne rolled her eyes heavenward. "May the Good Lord in all His mercy grant that I never need tending by your hands"—she flashed a mischievous smile—"or your precious weeds!"

A small shriek escaped Aleth as she caught up a handful of tender shoots and tossed them into Brienne's midnight hair. The two girls dissolved into a fit of laughter, tears filling their eyes as they collapsed breathless upon the forest floor.

Brienne clutched the stitch in her side and blinked the moisture from her lashes. Laughter was sweet salve to the soul and a blessed release, for when its merriment overtook her as now, all thought and shadow fled. Then, for a sliver of time, she could forget . . .

"Enough," she pleaded as she struggled to her feet and shook out her long tresses. "We've been overlong at this. I know of a little clearing ahead. Are you hungry yet?"

Aleth nodded heartily and stretched forth her hands.

Carefully, Brienne braced herself and pulled the small form upward, allowing Aleth to favor the thin rail of her right leg. A stab of pity passed through her and she quickly dropped her gaze to shield the look from Aleth.

Life was often unfair. There were many reasons for families to send their daughters to nunneries aside from love—or fear—of God, as well she knew. Aleth was a gentle maiden with pleasant features, honey-brown hair, and a sprinkling of freckles across a small, abbreviated nose. No doubt it was her infirmity that brought her to the doors of Levroux's abbey. A husband would be difficult to find for a disabled girl, and spinsters were a burden not to be had. Convents were a useful answer to so many problems.

Brienne pushed away her thoughts and caught up her basket. Offering an arm to Aleth, she guided them along a crooked path near to the forest's edge, then veered left to follow a faint trail. In short time the woodland opened onto a small sunlit glade, carpeted in the vibrant green of spring and bejeweled with violets and primroses.

Aleth's face brightened like that of a small child presented with a splendid gift. At times, Brienne wondered if the girl had ventured much beyond her solar before leaving her family's estate. Life was ever fresh and fascinating to Aleth, as though she were seeing it for the first time.

Brienne unfastened her mantle and spread it over the soft new grass. After settling Aleth down, she joined her on the makeshift blanket and set the basket between them. Dipping under herbs, bandages, and little pots of curatives, she produced a small bundle wrapped in linen.

"Bless you, Sister Clothilde," she murmured, setting out a prize wedge of tangy cheese, crusty bread, and dried apples from last autumn's bounty. A small skin of wine completed the repast. They bowed reverently over the little feast, gave humble thanks, then eagerly attacked the fare.

Brienne sampled the wine and stretched out to study the lacy canopy of leaves unfurling above her. It

had been a pleasant day that began with prayer and chores at the abbey. Then they accompanied several of the sisters to tend the sick of the village. Brienne visited a favorite little patient who nursed a broken leg and cheered him with the gift of a nice fat frog that she had captured along the way. Happily, she and Aleth had been allowed to part from the others and to seek herbs in the fringes of the forest—a rare freedom, given upon promises to not venture too far. Sister Ursuline would be so pleased with their findings.

Brienne rose from her grassy bed and moved about the glade, gathering delicate flowers on long, tender stems.

Aleth could only admire Brienne's effortless beauty. Her glossy black hair spilled down over her shoulders, framing a nearly perfect oval face except for its slightly pointed chin. Her startling violet eyes were set under long dark lashes, and her slim nose tilted pertly.

Aleth thought it odd that Brienne's father had not sought a wealthy match for her rather than cloistering her away. Brienne seldom spoke of it—rarely so after the deaths of her parents and only brother. Aleth had known Brienne for nigh on to eight years. Still, much about her closest friend remained in shadow.

Brienne settled down again near Aleth and shared out the fragrant blossoms to weave into chains. For a moment Aleth fumbled with a few stems, then, against better judgment, decided to broach the subject that plagued her.

"How is it you came to the Abbey of Levroux?"

Surprise touched Brienne's violet eyes, then died. She glanced away and focused upon the fluttering dance of a small white butterfly.

"I mean, 'tis not common for a family to cloister their eldest daughter," Aleth added quickly, then broke into a wide grin. "Tell me, did you do something terrible? Did you refuse to marry some rich, hideous toad your father desired for you?"

"Oh, nay, Aleth! Nothing like that," Brienne drew her knees up, under her chin, and considered a billowing cloud. "Though I've often thought, had my sister been sent in my stead, I would now be the wife of Robert Coustance, the Seigneur d'Esternay." She grimaced. "He is a brutal man, though Lisette loves him well."

"Then why?" Aleth pressed.

Brienne stared pensively into a thicket of trees, her brows gathering with memory. "I was the pure and holy offering," she said enigmatically, then fell silent.

The comment took Aleth aback but curiosity drove her on. "I don't understand."

Brienne broke away her gaze from the woodland and tossed Aleth a small, thoughtful smile. "'Tis all right, Aleth. God is good. Life is far better here, away from men and their lust for battle and blood."

"You do not like men?" Aleth blinked.

A glint of pain touched Brienne's eyes, then was gone. "It matters not," she sighed softly. "'Tis my intent to take the veil."

Aleth dropped the flowers she had been carelessly weaving into a circlet. "But you cannot! Not now," she blurted, daring to say what Brienne would not admit. "You have rightful claim to the barony of Valsemé. And what of your mother's lands at Chaudrey? You are an heiress, Brienne, and ward of the king. Surely he will call you forth from Levroux and arrange a good marriage."

"Dear, sweet Aleth." Brienne shook her head sadly. "You do not know the way of it. I am heiress to a Norseman's acre. Valsemé is no more, and Chaudrey is entailed to Lord Robert. 'Twas part of my sister's dower."

Brienne turned away as tears blurred her vision. Valsemé. Her heart cried out through a mist of time and pain. But that was a world ago, shattered by the ravaging Northmen.

Out of their icy lairs they came, sweeping boldly up the rivers in their *drakken*, the dreaded dragon boats. As if from nowhere they appeared, plundering and killing for booty, raping for pleasure, kidnapping those they would sell as slaves, then vanishing back from whence they came. They were vaporous devils at best, and the barons were hard pressed to deal with them.

The Seine and Loire soon became favored among their watery highways, and it was at the mouths of

those mighty rivers that the Norsemen wintered and entrenched themselves. No longer did they lust for booty and flesh alone, but now for the land itself. They rooted themselves in Frankish soil and the death bell knelled for Valsemé.

Brienne shut her eyes against the keen edge of memory. The barony lay along the river Toques, which flowed to the great Channel, *La Manche*, nearby, as did the Seine. So close, so close to the pirates' den.

Coming back to the moment, Brienne found herself gazing into Aleth's small, distressed face.

"He tried so hard, but to no avail," she explained achingly, as though she had been sharing her thoughts all the while. "Valsemé lay too close to the Norsemen's lair."

"Who tried?" Aleth prodded.

"Father . . ." Her thoughts slipped away on a river of memory.

Richard Beaumanoir defended his lands tirelessly for many years until he, as other neighboring lords, was forced to abandon them. He withdrew with his family and retainers to his wife's dower lands at Chaudrey. The shame of failing to protect the barony festered in his soul like a rotting pustule.

He soon became a king's man, allying himself with the powerful, and pursuing the Northmen relentlessly in a private war of revenge to regain his forsaken lands. Then in his obsession he sought to win God's favor—and Brienne was his offering. A younger daughter would not suffice, only the firstborn, the unblemished lamb, a sacrifice pure and holy. Overnight, Brienne was dispatched from the heart of her family into cloister at Levroux.

Lisette's marriage was next arranged to gain the might and power of Esternay, that self-made knight, the king's own champion.

For a time, God smiled on Beaumanoir. He triumphed in the meanest of battles till his fame swelled throughout the realm.

Despite his success, Beaumanoir was bitterly disappointed that Brienne refused the veil, as though she would invite God's displeasure. She argued that many noble ladies lived in cloister without benefit of vows, and she was not yet prepared to make her profession. Angrily, he warned that such stubbornness would bring misfortune upon their house, and when the wheel of fate turned round, it was she whom he blamed.

Brienne's mother soon succumbed to a mysterious ailment. Shortly after her death, Brienne's elder brother, Thomas, was cut down at their father's side by a Norse blade. Not a year had passed when Beaumanoir himself was felled before the walls of Poitiers in a daring ruse against the heathens.

"Brienne, Brienne," Aleth broke through her ruminations. "What do you mean, 'a Norseman's acre'? What of Valsemé?"

"Do you not know, Aleth?" She looked hard at her companion. Truly, the girl *had* never left her solar. "King Charles seeks to control the Norse menace. This year past he conceded lands to their chieftain, Rollo, in return for his homage and created him duke. My father's lands are part of the new duchy. They belong to the foreigner now."

Rollo, she thought bitterly, and his hated duchy of Normandy.

"I-I'm so sorry." Aleth groped for a comforting word.

"I am happy here at Levroux," Brienne reassured her. "And I feel safe, if that is possible. 'Tis a man's world, Aleth, and they threaten to tear it apart."

"The abbey seems set apart from our enemies, and I have not known such peace since I was a small child. Here, I am an equal with my sisters, not a man's piece of property. I have learned reading and ciphering, and have been taught the gift of healing."

Brienne sighed and managed a small smile. "The Lord is a gentle and loving master. To Him shall I pledge my troth."

Aleth abandoned the subject, grieved at the fresh pain she had caused her friend.



The soft peeling of bells, sounding distantly across the vale, roused Brienne from her drowsy state.

She suddenly became aware of the lengthening shadows of the trees and the low angle of the sun. With a sharp gasp she scrambled to her feet and gathered up the remains of the half-eaten meal.

"Aleth, hurry. We've overstayed and I was to help Sister Margaret in the scullery this eve."

Aleth stirred and rubbed her eyes. "No doubt you volunteered for that honor," she said through a yawn.

"Nay, not so. I do it for Lutigard. 'Tis spring and she suffers the rheum."

'Tis naught but her delicate hands that suffer from scrubbing pots! Ever she slips out of her duties, that one!" Aleth retorted.

"Come along or I'll have a sharper tongue wagging at me."

Their eyes locked in merriment. "Sister Margaret!" they chorused.

Progress toward the abbey was slowed by Aleth's frail leg. By the time they reached its high brooding walls, the light was falling rapidly. Brienne did not look forward to the scolding and lecture Mother Annice would surely deliver for their tardiness. Worse, she feared losing the privilege of ministering in the village. Perhaps if she revealed her intentions to take her vows, Mother's heart would soften.

As the girls approached the stony portal with its heavy iron gate, Brienne sensed something out of the ordinary. She detected movements and sounds uncommon to the hour. Her breath caught as the soft nickering of horses and low rumble of male voices drifted clearly above the courtyard beyond.

"Soldiers!" Brienne exclaimed in hushed tones.

It was not unusual for the abbey to offer its hospitality, as it was a place of rest and healing. That men had been permitted past the outer wall pricked her curiosity mildly, but such was allowed when the escorts were small and composed of kindred to the noble ladies who resided within.

Levroux was an unusual abbey in that it had been built upon the site of a Roman fortress overrun by invading Franks centuries before. The ruins were incorporated into the present monastery and offered the advantage of two enclosure walls. The inner partition embraced the tight cluster of buildings and church comprising the heart of the abbey, while the outer wall encompassed a sizable tract of land boasting orchards, a fish pond, storage sheds, stables, livestock shelters, and quarters for the servants that attended the abbey's needs. It was here that the travelers would be lodged, though several cells were reserved near the abbess's chambers for the more important guests.

Normally, Brienne would have eagerly looked forward to the worldly news the visitors brought with them, yet after her disturbing reminiscences of the afternoon, her stomach knotted at the prospect of encountering men-at-arms.

"Perhaps we best use the side entrance, Aleth. I shouldn't like to walk through a courtyard of soldiers and war horses." She shuddered at the thought of the enormous steeds.

The two slipped around the corner of the abbey as quickly as they could manage and proceeded to a small gate toward the far end, where they set off a jangling of bells.

A plump little figure garbed in black bustled across the grounds. "My lambs! Where have you been?" Sister Ursuline puffed excitedly, thrusting a massive key into the heavy lock. "Nothing is amiss? Come along. Come along," she jabbered. "Brienne, your hair! 'Tis sown with grass. Saints be with us! Hurry now. Mother Annice has been seeking you for ever so long. No, not you, Aleth, only Brienne."

"Yes, sister." Brienne held forth the basket, barely suppressing her amusement. "We brought herbs for your medicants."

Sister Ursuline peeked into the basket delightedly, then her eyebrows flew up in astonishment. Snatching up a bedraggled green, she exclaimed, "Good gracious! Wherever did you find *this*!"

"'Tis mugwort," Aleth proclaimed, tossing a little look of triumph at Brienne.

Sister struggled to compose herself. "My ladies, 'tis an aphrodisiac!"

Brienne and Aleth choked on the pronouncement as Sister Ursuline scuttled off toward the garderobe. An instant later she reappeared, rubbing her palms vigorously against the rough wool of her gown.

"We are well rid of *that*! Now, be off with you, my lady. Aleth, you may help me in the scullery. Lutigard fell victim to her rheum."

"I know," pouted Aleth. "Ever I pray for her deliverance!"



Brienne quickly plaited her hair as she darted across the cobbled pathway, past small stone buildings, and through a heavy archway. She hurried down the length of the refectory, rounded the corner, then halted abruptly, barely catching herself as she pitched forward.

At least twenty pairs of eyes greeted her own, now wide with surprise. The courtyard before her was filled with a colorful assemblage of grooms, squires, men-at-arms and their magnificent horses, all seemingly frozen at their tasks as they studied her with undisguised interest.

Brienne snatched the hood of her mantle up, over her head as heat suffused her cheeks. She thought at first to retreat from the scene before her, then realized that this was the quickest way to Reverend Mother's quarters.

Swallowing hard, she stepped forward and gingerly began skirting the assemblage of men as their eyes raked her admiringly. At a few overly loud and suggestive remarks, she broke into a run and dashed across the remainder of the courtyard. Husky laughter followed her to the shelter of the portico.

Men! How dare they, Brienne raged silently. *This is a convent, not a brothel!* They would respect her more when she wore the habit. She hastened along the covered porchway, hoping for no further encounters, and at length stopped before Mother Annice's chambers.

With a last straightening of her tunic and mantle, Brienne drew in a deep breath and rapped softly upon the door. Almost at once, it drew open and a small nun motioned her inside.

The room was dimly lit and smelled of musty parchment and burning tallow. A simple table served as a desk, flanked by hard wooden chairs and a basket of scrolls. In the corner, a precious psalter lay open atop a waist-high stand adorned with a richly embroidered cloth.

Mother Annice stood silently before a crucifix affixed to the wall. She was a tall, lean woman of uncertain age. As she turned toward her, Brienne noted how drawn and weary the abbess appeared tonight, her face a pale testament to the burdens of her office.

"Sister Catherine, please leave us." Mother Annice nodded to the diminutive nun.

When the door swept closed, Brienne could no longer contain herself. "Reverend Mother, forgive my belatedness. I am remiss beyond doubt. After ministering to our sick, I stayed awhile in the forest, seeking herbs and meditating . . . and the Lord has blessed that time, truly He has, for I have come to a most important decision. I desire to take the veil, Reverend Mother. I wish to profess my vows." She caught her breath and smiled hesitantly, awaiting the abbess's response.

Mother Annice closed her eyes for a few moments, and when she opened them again they glistened with unshed tears. "Come, child. Let us pray for our Lord's guidance."

The aging nun gripped Brienne's hands and pulled her down to the hard stone floor before the crucifix, her touch chill and dry.

With eyes fixed upon the broken body of Christ, Mother Annice intoned the ancient prayer, "*Pater noster, qui es in caelis, santificetur nomen tuum . . .*" At length she pronounced, "Amen. So be it."

She pulled her gaze from the crucifix and looked deeply into Brienne's eyes. Brienne's breath caught at the abbess's pain-filled expression.

"Are you familiar with the Book of Isaiah, child? Look to the second chapter and remember it well: 'He will teach us what He wants us to do; we will walk in the paths He has chosen.'"

Silence fell like a pall over the room. Tears brimmed the old nun's eyes as she rose in a slow, fluid motion. Taking Brienne by the hands, she gently drew her to her feet then kissed her forehead.

"Come," Mother Annice whispered, and ushered her from the room.



A certain dread crept into Brienne's soul as she and the Reverend Mother walked silently down the covered passageway and traversed the courtyard. She barely noticed how it had emptied of horses and grooms. Only a few men now milled about in the dusk. She sensed only that something was amiss.

Tendrils of apprehension spiraled through her.

A few moments later, Mother Annice swung wide the heavy oaken door to the refectory. Brienne paused cautiously upon the threshold.

The hall was filled with Frankish knights and men-at-arms. Some sat at table, devouring savory meat pasties and drinking heartily of cold cider that the good nuns proffered, while others stood about in small groups deep in their arguments and banter.

As the two women entered the hall, a hush rippled over the room. All eyes seemingly turned as one and settled upon Brienne. She fought not to tremble under their intense regard. There was something in those looks to which she could not put a name.

A tall dark figure broke away from a small cluster of men at the far end of the hall and strode confidently toward them. A moment passed before Brienne recognized the commanding frame of the Seigneur d'Esternay, Robert Coustance.

"My Lord." She dropped into a deep curtsy, overcome with surprise. "How unexpected to see you. I pray all is well."

Esternay paused a moment, drinking in her intoxicating beauty. Damn Beaumanoir, anyway. The girl's existence had been hidden from him until his betrothal was sealed with her sister, and then, only on the wedding day itself, was the elder daughter brought forth from cloister to celebrate the festivities.

Lisette was a comely enough wench and agreeable in all matters that concerned him, but she lacked the vividness and the spirit he witnessed in this beauty. Such a match they could have made. And now this cursed business that brought him to Levroux. Damn Beaumanoir again.

"Is all well with my sister, my lord?" Brienne met his gaze.

He rubbed the scar above his heavy brows. "*Oui, oui*. She is abed with child again. We fervently hope she will carry this babe to term." A trace of bitterness steeled his voice. Undoubtedly he could have sired several sons by now upon the healthy young woman before him, but her frail sister had miscarried all she had conceived thus far.

Uneasiness gnawed at Brienne under Lord Robert's persistent stare. He was not really a handsome man, with a long, slightly crooked nose, and heavily lidded eyes. Yet his bearing was impressive and imposing. His thick black hair was worn tapered to the shoulders and his beard was cropped close along the jaw, lending him a sinister air. Lisette once confided that the beard hid a most hideous scar acquired in his youth.

Brienne felt oddly entrapped of a sudden, much like a small winged creature entangled in a spider's web. "If you think me not too bold, how is it that you come to our fair abbey, my lord?"

Esternay's look darkened. "I come on the king's business, Lady Brienne, concerning your barony."

"Valsemé?" Her brows lifted in surprise. "Does our good king regret his generous gift to the Norse vermin so soon?"

"Nay, my lady. Rollo has thus far honored his oath to Charles. He even joins us against Flanders."

"Ah, the noble pagan," she scoffed.

Esternay smiled at her unbridled fire. "The *noble pagan* received baptism at the hand of Archbishop Franco himself, as have his men. Already he begins a cathedral at Rouen."

"Do you defend this glorified cur of Normandy, who has stripped me of my father's lands?" Her temper flared.

"'Twas the king's gift, not mine," he retorted. Indeed they would have been his to claim had Brienne been his bride. But Beaumanoir played him false, giving him the second-born daughter. When Beaumanoir fell in battle, Charles moved swiftly to place himself as protector over both Brienne and her lands of Valsemé. By the Rood, he himself would wrest the lands free of the Norse claws given the chance.

"The king purposes to harness these Northmen and use them to our own benefit." He echoed Brienne's thoughts from earlier that day. "My mission here will bind them further to our side."

"How so, my lord? What has it to do with Levroux?"

"Not with Levroux, my dear. With you."

Brienne swayed momentarily under the weight of his words.

Esternay turned and began to pace, choosing his next words carefully.

"Rollo has proven to be quite astute in matters of state and fashions his duchy in the true Frankish manner. While he retains sole power as its duke, he has appointed his most loyal men and relatives to hold his lands in obeisance to him."

He measured the maid with a sharp gaze before delivering his next tidings. "Valsemé has been awarded to his sister's husband, a man named Gruel Atli."

Brienne stiffened, his words settling on her like a chilling mist.

"Atli sought to bring forth his wife from the northern climes to join him," he continued, his eyes never leaving hers, "but she fell ill and died before the journey commenced."

"And how does this news concern me, now that my lands are forfeit?" she asked tightly.

He swept the soft curves of her body with his gaze, and began to pace anew, circling his quarry.

"As I said, the king seeks ways to influence the affairs of the duchy as much as he dare without interfering directly."

Esternay drew behind her, his breath falling upon her neck. She flinched.

"The Normans brought few of their own women. In truth, they appear to prefer our own Frankish beauties." He lifted the heavy ebony plait from her shoulder and inhaled its fresh scent. Brienne bristled at his familiarity. "Their blood already begins to mingle with our own. In time, it will be so diluted they will be more Frank than Norse." He replaced the braid, allowing his fingers to brush the curve of her neck. "Of course, that will require several generations."

He moved to stand in front of her.

"Our king would hasten the process by returning our own villeins to the land. Most fled in the wake of the Norsemen. They are understandably afraid. But Charles is ardent in this matter and would grant them, shall we say, a *noble* example."

"You speak in riddles, Lord Robert." Fire snapped in her eyes though her face had gone pale. "Be out with it. I would have an end to this and think no more upon the Norse pox that infests our fair lands."

Esternay smiled grimly. The girl was strong-willed and unpredictable like her father. It did not bode well. With a heavy sigh, he withdrew a parchment from his vest and held it forth, displaying the king's great seal.

"As your sovereign king and lord protector, His Highness Charles III decrees that you are to set henceforth for Valsemé, the land of your father, and thereupon pledge your troth in marriage to the new lord baron of that holding, Gruel Atli, that your blood may mix with his in the future heir of Valsemé, and that in your presence you may intercede in behalf of your people."

"Nay!" The word burst from her lips and she whirled to clutch the nun's sleeve. "What madness is this? Reverend Mother, tell him," she pleaded, her voice breaking. "Tell him I am to take the veil! I am pledged to God!"

"Is this true?" Esternay glared at the nun. A chit of a girl must not be allowed to thwart these tenuous negotiations, however distasteful.

Mother Annice smoothed Brienne's hair. "She revealed these intentions to me only moments ago."

"You did not tell her of this?" He waved the parchment menacingly.

"Nay, 'twas God's own inspiration."

Esternay began to pace like a great caged panther, then pivoted abruptly. "No matter. Charles was not advised of his ward's wishes, nor has he given consent to such. This is the course he has deigned and so it shall stand."

A scream tore from Brienne's throat as she hurtled herself at the black knight and pummeled his chest with her fists. "What manner of man are you, to deliver your kin to the bed of the heathens that slayed my father and brother and stole my lands? You have no honor!"

Esternay's hand struck without warning and Brienne reeled, the light shattering before her eyes. She fell against the wall, tasting blood at the corner of her mouth.

Esternay retreated a few steps. He had not wanted to harm the girl, but she pricked him sorely. He would tolerate no slur upon that which he held above all else, his honor.

"Prepare yourself, my lady, for in two days hence we depart for Valsemé."

Brienne crumpled at the feet of Reverend Mother and sobbed uncontrollably. There must be a way. By all that was holy, she would find an escape. She sought solace then in the labyrinth of her mind, scarcely aware when the kind hands of Mother Annice guided her from the room.

The abbey bells tolled in the crisp early morn, signaling Prime and the call to devotions.

Brienne rose stiffly from her pallet and quickly began her ablutions. She flinched as her fingertips grazed her tender mouth, and the memory of the night before flooded back.

Brienne flung open a small wooden trunk and slid her hands deftly among the folds of clothing until they closed about a prized disk of polished steel.

She examined the ugly discoloration spread along her jaw. No doubt it would turn a sickly purplish-yellow in several days' time, and she wondered briefly how the Normans would receive a battered bride. Perhaps she should goad Lord Robert into beating her till her entire face was swollen and misshapen. Then, with luck, Gruel Atli would reject her.

Brienne sighed at her foolishness and stood to pull on a chemise of soft ivory linen. Nothing deterred men such as he, or Lord Robert, or even the king. Power was what they were born to, suckled upon, and bred to wield ruthlessly in attaining their precious ambitions. What match a mere maid? Somehow she must elude their mad schemes.

Donning a shorter, rose-colored tunic, she folded back the wide sleeves to reveal the creamy undergarment. A simple belt of metal links girdled the gown, its clasp embossed with a falcon, her father's personal emblem. Her emblem now.

Coiling her hair loosely at the nape of her neck and catching up her woolen mantle, Brienne stepped forth from the small cell into the fresh morning air and set off to join the community for first devotions. Her footsteps froze as she realized that a soldier kept pace with her a short distance away.

She studied him through narrowed eyes. This was no escort granted as courtesy due a lady. Did Lord Robert fear she would slip from his grasp? Had he the gall to set a guard to her heels, here, within the abbey walls? In truth, she had found little time to formulate an escape, and it nettled her all the more that he could so easily hold her prisoner. Squaring her shoulders, Brienne walked briskly toward the church, heaping curses upon her brother-by-marriage through gritted teeth.

The Seigneur d'Esternay awaited her, leaning casually against the side of the steep, aged steps. Brienne met him with an icy silence. How she longed to wipe the smugness from his face.

Throughout the service the dark knight held close to her, keeping her separate from the other women. When they broke their fast in the guest refectory a short while later, she became thoroughly vexed, for Lord Robert was never more than an arm's length away.

She tasted her wine in small, agitated sips, flashing daggered looks at him over the goblet's rim.

"How impressive that so noble a lord rises early to join our humble community in prayer," she taunted. "Perhaps 'tis repentance you seek for some foul deed."

Esternay observed her dispassionately.

"Of course, 'tis more surprising still that I am granted this day of grace to pack my meager possessions before being sacrificed to the Nordic gods."

Esternay lifted a dark brow and wiped his hands on the folds of cloth that hung from the table.

"In truth, we wait upon two monks, missionaries to the Northmen. They will serve as my interpreters and remain in the duchy to tend its 'flock.' One is reportedly a Dane." He smiled, taking in Brienne's surprise. "'Tis said that he atones for the sins of his wayward brothers by zealously evangelizing them." Esternay drained his cup and rose. "Attend to yourself, my lady. We leave once the churchmen arrive and are suitably refreshed."

The crust Brienne nibbled caught in her throat. The man was insufferable! Doubtless, had the monks accompanied him and his party to Levroux, he would not have granted her time to use even the garderobe

before departing.

Brienne was shadowed with fervor throughout the day. If she ventured near the abbey's gates or stables, she instantly found unbidden company at her elbow. When she thought to pray in the chapel and plead her case before God, she discovered herself surrounded by questionably devout soldiers.

Sanctuary might well be her only hope, but if Lord Robert and his men feared she would gain it, Brienne only despaired of having the chance to try. A sense of hopelessness began to poison her resolve. Naught would assuage the dull ache that now spread from temple to crown, born of the day's tensions.

At length she sought refuge in the privacy of her room, but here, too, she found no peace. A coffer of elegant clothing awaited her, a wedding gift and peace offering from the king. It contained a rich array of gaily colored gowns, transparent veils, fur-trimmed mantles, and jeweled girdles.

The beautiful clothes served only to inflame Brienne's ire and mounting frustration. How typically male! She would not be bought with finery to kindle the passions of a Norseman. In a furor she flung the garments about the tiny cell until they covered the floor and hung askew from the solitary chair that graced the room.

Angrily, she stripped off her tunic and chemise, then donned her meanest garb, a worn and faded gown of a dull greenish-brown.

Flinging open the cell door, she stalked past the two startled soldiers hovering nearby and headed for the stables. There she found a length of rope and tied it about her hips, creating a coarse girdle of sorts.

Good, she thought. 'Tis fitting raiment for one condemned.

Pivoting on her heel, she marched stiffly toward the scullery, determined to engross herself in the most noxious task available till she awoke from this nightmare.



A shrouded figure moved across the stable rushes and paused in the shadows of the door. His icy blue gaze followed her with keen interest.

"The maid was to be willing, yet she bears the mark of a heavy hand."

An older man emerged from the stall where he had just quartered an undersized palfrey, and frowned from beneath a thatch of bushy brows after Brienne.

"Patience, my son. We will soon know the truth of it."



Brienne's ever-present escorts followed hurriedly behind her clipped steps. Much to her relief, they remained outside the small stone building as she whisked inside.

Brienne halted abruptly on the threshold. A dozen women worked furiously sanding pots and implements, all seemingly driven by the same madness.

Red-rimmed eyes lifted to greet her. As she spied Aleth, Lutigard, Sisters Ursuline, Clothilde, and Margaret, she realized that these women ached for her.

Suddenly, the crushing reality of the king's directive overwhelmed her, and she slumped against the wall, burying her face in her hands. What had she done to merit this misbegotten lot? She bitterly regretted not having taken the veil when her father had pressed her to do so. She would be safely tucked away from the world and forgotten now. As a nun, she would be considered dead to it.

Aleth limped forward with a stricken look, tenderly stretching out her arms. Brienne clung to her dearest friend and the floodgates opened anew. No words could express the depths of her grief.

As Aleth's own tears spilled unchecked, she stroked Brienne's hair. "Shhh. Do not cry, *chère amie*. I will help you. Upon my word, somehow I will find a way to help you."

"What goes here!" A deep voice thundered across the room as Esternay's dark frame filled the doorway.

Brienne spun around, fearing that he had overheard Aleth, but then she realized his gaze was fixed

upon her shabby gown.

"Why do you dress yourself as a beggar and waste your time at these chores?" he demanded.

Brienne lifted her chin and met his gaze evenly. "I do penance, my lord, for surely my sins are great to have warranted such a fate as the one set before me."

Esternay growled and quickly surveyed the room. "You are to cease these petty tasks and ready yourself for our departure on the morrow. 'Tis the will of the king."

"The king? And what is your will, my lord?"

"I am sworn to Charles. My will must need comply with that of my overlord . . . for honor's sake," he challenged.

"Then what is your gain? Land? Gold? Thirty pieces of silver?"

Esternay winced at the reference to the traitorous apostle. "Nay, my lady, I take no bribe. Charles is set on this course and deems me the proper escort as your closest kinsman. You may think upon your forthcoming union as your family's restoration to Valsemé."

"*Certes*, to Esternay's advantage! Is that it?" she snapped, stepping closer. "You tie the swine's loyalty to your shield through the bonds of my marriage. Then will he keep his Norse brethren from your door, and join you upon the battlefield? Is that it? You would use the heathens' bloodlust to strengthen the ranks and power of Esternay?"

His eyes glittered and she knew she had struck the mark. Yet there was something more guarded within the depths of those impenetrable eyes. Something dark, deadly. She sucked in her breath sharply and fell back a pace.

"What else? What plans have you laid that not even Charles foresees?" she hissed, ice splintering through her.

"You are distraught, my dear, no doubt from the shock of your impending nuptials," he replied evenly, outwardly unfazed. "Do not allow your fears to twist your reasoning."

"Do they? And does Lisette quite agree with your *mission* here, my lord?"

"She will not be told till the child is born. 'Twould be unwise to distress her overmuch at this time."

Brienne decried his words with a laugh. "Oh, a most noble lord indeed! And I thought my enemies all lay without, yet I find a viper hiding in my sister's bed!"

Esternay drew back his hand to strike her, then slowly lowered it. She would not get the better of him again. Damn, but the wench didn't know when to hold her tongue. She deserved a thorough thrashing, but he would not oblige her in front of so many, particularly not those of the cloth.

Grabbing her by the arm, he dragged her from the building and back across the courtyard toward her cell. Throwing open the door, he quickly surveyed the room's disarray, then drove his fingers into her flesh and yanked her to him, holding her a breath away.

"I suggest you accept your fate and prepare yourself, for we face a most arduous journey."

"Never," she breathed between clenched teeth.

Esternay shoved her roughly through the door and she stumbled to the floor, the stone biting her hip.

"Heed me well, vixen. Willingly or not, we leave on the morrow. You may ride of your own accord or trussed in hemp, but ride you will."

Esternay retreated across the courtyard, stiff backed, as his men assumed their posts. Brienne was left to sob upon the gowns and furs that littered her chamber floor.



Tints of lavender and rose threaded the awakening skies as an assortment of birds trebled noisily from their lofty perches, unconcerned with the affairs of humankind.

Brienne paused mutely upon the portal of her cell, still dressed in the drab brown dress of the day before. The sleepless night had been spent in prayer with an unexpected visitor, Mother Annice. Now she waited numbly, exhaustion threatening to overtake her, the mean garb her last silent protest.

She stared vacantly about the familiar surroundings that had served as her home for eight years and

could not fathom that she was to be so callously torn away and given over to her enemy. There was naught to hope for. Her royal protector had betrayed her as had her sister's own husband. She was but a pawn in a game of power between men.

Brienne turned back into her chamber. The rich clothes had been returned to their coffer and her own simpler garments added to it. All was in readiness, save her own person, but ready, willing, or accepting she would never be. Though subjected physically to the ordeal, her hatred for the Northmen was the armor of her heart.

Gathering her mantle about her shoulders, she returned to the doorway and spied Esternay moving across the courtyard, his long strides rapidly eating up the distance between them. She straightened her shoulders and braced herself to be rebuffed for her mean attire.

He halted before her and, after measuring her appearance for a brief moment, grunted and offered his arm. Brienne lifted her cool gaze and, with a faint smile, brushed past it.

In silence they proceeded to the abbey church where a mass was to be celebrated and a final blessing bestowed before the retinue departed.

Aleth waited by the stone staircase looking pale and drawn. She limped forward and grasped her friend's hands. In a familiar gesture, Brienne braced Aleth's arm and they mounted the stairs in slow, measured steps.

The bleakness inside the church matched Brienne's dismal mood. Faint shafts of light filtered through small windows arched high above as candles sputtered in their sockets after the night's long vigil. She hugged herself against the perpetual cold that plagued the stony house of the Lord.

Brienne felt, more than saw, the eyes that embraced her. Lifting her gaze, she found crystal-blue eyes and a pale halo of hair glinting from deep within a monk's hood.

She dropped her lashes and nervously bit her lower lip. The Dane! A Norseman, and so near. She fought to control her watery knees. But he was a holy man now, a Christian, if such a thing were possible. Stealing a small glance, she found him bent to prayer, a silhouette of coarse brown robes.

A second monk entered the sanctuary and ascended the altar steps. Sturdy in stature, with an undisciplined swath of iron gray hair beneath his tonsured crown, Brienne knew him at once to be Brother Bernard. Reverend Mother spoke of him earlier in rather shocked tones. The other she named as Brother Lyting, and confided only that he kept the Rule of Silence to atone for the crimes of his pagan kinsmen.

As the service progressed and the celebrant droned on in sonorous Latin, Brienne wondered if she supported Aleth or if, in truth, 'twas the other way round.

After the words of consecration were pronounced, Brother Bernard descended the altar stairs, his chalice clasped chest high, and passed through the gates that separated the sanctuary from the faithful. He assumed his station and began dispensing the Host to the communicants.

Aleth hobbled forward, clutching tightly to Brienne's arm. Brienne first took the Host, closing her eyes and tilting her head back as she received the wafer upon her tongue. She then braced Aleth as her friend repeated the ritual, and the two moved aside, allowing Lord Robert forward.

From the corner of her eye, Brienne glimpsed Esternay lowering his lids and tilting back his large head. Suddenly, Aleth shoved Brienne hard toward the gates of the sanctuary with a desperate look that told all. Brienne quickened her pace as a shout exploded from behind, followed by a squeal, then the sound of bodies thudding on the floor.

She glanced back to see that Aleth had thrown herself in Esternay's path and the knight now lay sprawled over the slight form, cursing vividly.

Brienne darted forward, the thunder of footsteps on stone closing in on her. A hand shot out and grasped her mantle, but the garment broke free of its clasp and in the next instant she slipped through the gate and gained the altar. She sank upon the marble steps, heaving for breath.

Esternay rose in pursuit, intent on dragging her from the altar.

Brother Bernard fumbled in the folds of his robes and a moment later blocked the knight's way, brandishing a small sword in one hand while still gripping the chalice in the other.

"By all that is holy, you shall not violate sanctuary!" the monk bellowed in his deep, gravelly voice.

Esternay's face contorted with rage and three of his men sought to restrain him.

"Give heed!" the monk warned. "Such sacrilege is committed on pain of excommunication!"

Esternay struggled for composure. A few seconds later, he barked out orders posting several of his men within the church to guard the girl and seize her should she leave the altar area, then stalked from the building.

Brother Bernard hastily concluded services. Not trusting Esternay, he vowed that he and his companion would alternately keep vigil and assure no offense was committed in the house of God.

Mother Annice, in turn, instructed several of her nuns to remain at their devotions and keep watch over the others, most especially Brienne.

Brienne groaned now at the furor she had created and fell to silent prayer upon the altar steps.

Throughout the day, Esternay returned glowering and seething as he paced about, inspecting the building over and over, noting carefully all exits and passageways, particularly those in the rear of the church where a small maze of chambers lay. At times he strode boldly to the gate to hurl threats at Brienne, one time vowing he would bring the Norsemen themselves to lay waste to the abbey if she did not relent.

It was early evening when Brother Bernard entered the sanctuary with a small parcel of food and settled himself on a step next to Brienne. She stared curiously at the sword that had been resheathed in its rich and unusual scabbard.

Brother Bernard chuckled at her inspection. "We made quite a display for them, did we not?"

'Twas you who were the spectacle, I think, good brother," she replied with a wan smile.

He patted his weapon. "Aye, my lady. But if you have not heard, I've spent considerable time among the heathenous Northmen. It gives me good comfort to keep my friend at my hip while I wield the Word of God upon my tongue!"

Brienne's laughter tinkled brightly in the gloomy church, dispelling the melancholy that had shrouded her moments before.

'Tis a most unusual friend, and foreign born by its look, yet quite handsome."

It was the monk's turn to smile as he proudly shifted the scabbard onto his lap to display its fine workmanship. Brienne's eyes widened at the delicate ribbons of silver and gold, inlaid in intricate, interlocking patterns, convoluting gracefully and sprouting into stylized heads of fearsome animals.

"Rollo's gift," Brother Bernard said simply.

Brienne lifted her gaze hesitantly. "You know the man?"

"Aye, indeed, since his early days as *sækungur*, 'sea king' in their language. I return to labor in his duchy. There is much work to be done in Normandy, and the harvest is promising."

Brienne frowned, "Have you come, then, to persuade me to leave sanctuary?"

"Nay, child. Only to see if you have set the matter before God."

Brienne nodded as sea-green eyes regarded her. "Ever since I learned I was to be given over to Gruel Atli, I have beseeched our Lord for deliverance and He has seen fit to do so."

"Has He, my lady?"

Panic, confusion and frustration clogged her heart all at once. "What do you mean?"

"Only that you have told God what *you* want. But have you sought out His will for your life?"

"This *is* His will. It must be!"

"You want it to be."

Brienne fell silent and brooded.

"Listen, my child. Whether it be God's will or not, I cannot say. But do not deny that He may call you forth from cloister to serve Him in a greater way."

"In a Norman's bed? I cannot believe it," she protested.

"Is that all you see? Think, Brienne. The Normans swore fealty to Charles and embraced our faith, though that needs careful nurturing, to be sure. They bring few of their own women. Not even a half dozen have I witnessed. 'Tis our Frankish maids they take to wife. Do you not understand what sway our women hold, first with their husbands and then over their children, the next generation of Normans? They may not realize their own power.

"Our peoples must meld, Brienne," he continued. "Together, they must become one. Men can do so

only through words, alliances, and loyalties, but women bring it about through their very flesh. I know 'tis not an easy task, nor is mine, to change the heart and mind of a heathen, but we are all God's children. *All*. As the Baronne de Valsemé, you can wield exceptional influence for the sake of our people and the future of their offspring."

He looked directly into her eyes. "Before you say nay, set the matter before God and most earnestly seek His direction. Will you do that, my child?"

Brienne lowered her gaze, and with her heart sinking somewhat, she nodded in agreement.

The next hours followed, fraught with anxiety and fresh fear. Most desperately, Brienne would have it that her destiny lay in the arms of the Church, not those of her enemy. But then she fretted at the prospect of spending years in sanctuary. Such was known to happen. What future there? More, she feared the wrath of Esternay should she dare leave its protection. What matter the day or hour? He would be waiting to appease his bruised pride and she had no champion to aid her cause. And what of the king's own anger, or that of Gruel Atli? Father in Heaven, what had she done?

If her resolve wavered throughout the night, it was quickly restored at the mere thought of the despicable Normans. They were Danes, mostly, or so she was told, though no one seemed certain of Rollo's origins. She had seen such men once from the tower in the bailey when they laid siege to Valsemé. She shuddered as she recalled the ferocity with which those heathens fought. That day was nearly lost, and it was shortly thereafter that her family withdrew to Chaudrey.

Brienne hugged herself against the chill of night. Once again she felt the scrutiny of the shrouded monk, Brother Lyting. Feigning prayer, she glanced at him surreptitiously from beneath her lashes.

He studied her intently, of that she was sure, though his features remained heavily concealed within the folds of his cowl. He would prove tall should he unfold himself from his cramped posture. The startling breadth of his shoulders strained the limits of his robes, suggesting a physique hardened more by the rigorous training of sword and shield than by cross and gospel.

Brienne knew she should hate this man for the very blood that flowed through his veins. Yet he was a man of God. Could she condemn where the Father forgave?

As the night deepened and melted into early morn, Brienne lay exhausted upon the cold stone floor, prostrate in prayer before the altar. Divine guidance had shed no light on the path she should choose, and now she fell into a light, restless sleep.

She was a child of twelve summers once again, standing tiptoe upon an uneven stool and peering out the narrow slit of a window in the tower wall. Below, her father's army was retreating inside the defense works. Anxiously, she scanned the fields beyond where the enemy pursued a few straggling Franks, racing for the protection of the motte and bailey.

They were huge men, red and golden of hair, wearing conical helmets with nose guards that concealed their features. Her eyes fixed upon a black-haired heathen, the only one of his kind, as he closed in upon a fleeing soldier. Whirling his battle-ax round in a mighty arc, he cleaved the Frank in two from head to shoulder. Brienne screamed at the sight, deafening her own ears as watched in horror. As though the Norseman had heard her, he lifted his battle-fevered gaze to the high window above and smiled, chilling Brienne to her immortal soul. He hefted his bloodied ax upon his broad shoulder and continued in his pursuit of her kinsmen.

Brienne bolted upright, fully awake. Sheer terror washed through her and she began to shake violently. Never could she be a bride to a bloodthirsty spawn of the Devil!

Throwing herself down again onto the stone floor, she frantically beseeched the Almighty, fear strangling every fiber of her being. "Lord, set aside this bitter cup, I beg of thee."

Drink. The word was instantly impressed in her mind.

Brienne's head jerked upward. Had someone spoken? She lifted herself and surveyed the small gathering in the church. Sisters Basina and Lioba knelt in silent prayer, as did Brother Lyting. Two of Esternay's soldiers whispered quietly together at the rear of the church, while a third appeared to doze near a side door.

Brienne turned back to her prayers, sure that the anxieties of the past days were fast overcoming her.

"Grant, O Lord, that this cup may pass."

Drink. The word was strongly impressed once more. *Live the love that is within you.*

"Nay!" Brienne gasped, pressing her cheek to the cold floor. "Merciful Father, do not ask it of me, I beg Thee." Hot tears flooded her eyes. "I am so afraid."

Scripture poured into her mind. *Perfect love casts out all fear.*

Pressing both hands to her temples, she fought to still the flow of thoughts. "Nay, I am but one, only one"—her breath came in shallow gulps—"and I am all alone."

In that moment, she was flooded with a presence, suffusing her with warmth and wrapping her in a tender, loving embrace.

I am with you always.

The presence lingered awhile, casting away all doubt and objection, and soothing her heart's distress.

As the first golden threads of dawn spun through the lofty windows and spilled down over the altar, Brienne rose to her feet. Smoothing away the tears, she bowed reverently toward the altar.

"Thy will be mine."

Turning, she took scant notice the wide-eyed stares or gaping mouths of her companions, but descended the altar steps and walked purposely through the gate and out of the sanctuary.



In short order, the Seigneur d'Esternay was apprised of the turn of events, and a flurry of activity swept through the abbey as the escort prepared its departure.

Brienne's "experience" was recounted by the witnesses in glowing terms, recalling how she had pleaded and cried out upon the altar, then, uttering a few words, quit the sanctuary.

Esternay would have liked to throttle the girl outright for the embarrassment she caused him, but he quickly discovered that the soldiers who held vigil with her now zealously watched over her like three clucking hens.

It was rumored about that the Heavenly Father had called the maid forth from sanctuary. Esternay scoffed at this but fought down his yearning to punish the girl. It would be unwise to harm one so obviously sheltered under the "Divine Wing."

Instead, he dispersed Brienne's new champions, sending two, Blanchard and Leveque, ahead to coordinate their rendezvous with the Norman escort. Brother Lyting, though strangely reluctant to leave, agreed to accompany them and interpret the mediations. The men were strictly instructed to make no mention of the girl's initial aversion to the marriage or of her flight into sanctuary. Mortain, the third bemused soldier, remained to attend to the girl's needs.

Esternay kicked back his chair as he envisioned the chit in the Norman's arms. Had he not witnessed her raw fear of their kind? If God protected her, then He also provided a fitting chastisement for the troublesome wench. Aye, the Norseman would tame her with his brand. The image should have placated his craving for vengeance, but it cheered him not at all.



Brienne carefully selected an ensemble for her initial encounter with the Norman host and folded it neatly into her coffer. Knowing it would take several days to reach the borders of Normandy, she chose a gown more suitable to traveling on horseback, nutmeg in hue and devoid of elaborate trimmings.

She wove her thick locks into two plaits and coiled them into a crown atop her head. Then she covered her hair with a *couvre-chef*, a long, flowing scarf. She arranged the ends modestly across her throat rather than allowing them to fall freely as she was usually wont to do.

For so many years she had lived in community with other women, equal in all things. Now, in one short hour, she would return to the world of men, surrounded first by Frankish soldiers, then delivered to a cortege of Norman warriors. A small tremor passed through her and she adjusted her *couvre-chef* once more.

A soft rapping sounded at the door and Aleth peeked in. The two clasped each other warmly. Aleth stammered momentarily and stared hard at the floor. "I want to come with you, Brienne."

"Aleth! Do you know what you say?"

"*Oui*. I have thought on it long and well, and would not have you face this fate alone. You will need a friend."

"Oh, Aleth, your companionship would be most welcome, but I fear for your safety among these foreigners."

Aleth studied the toe of her leather shoe. "Surely they will have no cause to harm a cripple . . . or the personal maid of the Baronne de Valsemé."

Brienne smiled wide at this last bit of reasoning and realized for the first time that her position did yield some power. She embraced her friend heartily. "Come, then, Aleth. I shall need a friend such as you."

It was midday before the entourage was finally assembled in the courtyard. Brienne was astonished to be gifted with a magnificent white palfry outfitted in rich Frankish trappings, yet another of Charles's bridal offerings. The sovereign seemed most desirous of this union.

The nuns sent exquisitely embroidered altar linens and vestments for the long-inactive church of Valsemé. To Brienne, they presented the precious gift of a small mongrel puppy which rode in a wicker basket attached to her palfry's saddle.

A tearful moment passed as the women exchanged their last farewells. Sister Ursuline sniffed noisily while many of the ladies dabbed at their eyes, chins aquiver. Mother Annice pressed a smooth hollow reed into Brienne's hand, containing a small, tightly rolled parchment.

"Isaiah. Remember, child." Reverend Mother smiled through her own tears, then clutched Brienne to her with surprising strength. "Godspeed."

The gates swung open, and the column of soldiers, attendants, and carts moved slowly out of the abbey. Brienne and Aleth assumed their positions in the center of the escort, with Brother Bernard trailing behind on his stout little mare.

No one was prepared for the greeting they received as they emerged from the age-old enclosure walls. It appeared that every villager for miles around was assembled there waving bright cloths, throwing flower petals, and uttering their blessings as they hailed the maid that God called forth from Levroux. Surely, Heaven was at long last attentive to their prayers.

Esternay scowled at the delirious scene, wondering how word of Brienne's "holy encounter" had spread so rapidly, then dismissed it. The abbey employed many workers from the village. Since the escort would be traveling the old Roman roads afar of the villages, there was little chance that the spectacle would be repeated. With that consoling thought he commanded the troops forward.

Brienne strained to look back as the gathering faded into specks of color and the silhouette of the abbey melted into the horizon. The last visual tie severed, she turned forward in her saddle to face the uncertain future that awaited her.

The furry little puppy licked the last droplets of water from Brienne's cupped palm. She took up the skin from her saddle again, soaking a small scarf, and wiped at her face and neck. She contemplated the soiled cloth with disgust, feeling utterly incrustated with the grime of four days' travel.

The pup whimpered to be out of his basket, and Brienne scratched his ears comfortingly. "Patience, little one."

The pup cocked its head sideways.

"What shall I call you?" She stole a glance at Aleth riding several arm lengths away on a small brown palfrey. "Mugwort! Now, there's a fine name."

"You wouldn't!" Aleth exclaimed.

"Nay. He's not so forlorn-looking as that." She laughed at Aleth's withering look.

Brienne studied the uneven splotches that adorned the little fellow's coat and decided upon "Patch." The puppy yapped excitedly as though he approved.

She shifted her attention to the beautiful white palfrey beneath her. "You are more difficult." She stroked the shimmering coat. "*Etoile*, perhaps. Star"

"That would be *asta* in Greek," Brother Bernard said, reining in his horse next to Brienne's, "or *stella* in Latin. Of course, there be *candra*, also Latin. It means 'shining.'

"Candra. *Mais oui*." She tousled the white mane playfully. "It suits her well, do you not agree?"

Brother Bernard smiled, nodding, then watched Brienne's gaiety fade as she squinted into the distance.

"How much longer?"

"On the morrow, my lady. Blanchard and Leveque returned last evening with the details. Brother Lyting awaits us at Valsemé. Did you not know?"

She shook her head.

"Esternay," he said flatly, not expanding on the comment. He had developed an acute distaste for the man from the first when he and his companion were pressed to depart the abbey no sooner than they had arrived. Absurd. He was not a young man anymore, to be jostled about the realm on a broken-down palfrey at the whim of some overbearing knight. He said as much. Years among the heathens had given him pluck, by God!

"We meet late morn inside the boundaries of the duchy, my lady, at the site of a Roman ruin. The precise location is marked by an ancient oak. These Norse believe spirits dwell in trees and mounds and such. Hold them sacred. Yet 'tis an odd place to meet a bride. Mayhap they think it home to some fertility goddess," he mused with a shrug. "Sorry, my dear. Ah, well, Blanchard and Leveque will direct us."

"I vow, you are a most irregular churchman with your sword and colorful jests," she chided.

"I have a colorful past." His eyes twinkled.

"Pray tell me what to expect when we meet these Normans. Will Lord Robert leave us to them?"

"Nay, child. Both escorts will accompany us to Valsemé. As the king's representative, the Seigneur d'Esternay must see you safely there and wed before he returns to court."

Brienne fidgeted a moment with Candra's reins, lacing them between her fingers.

"Having second thoughts, my child? Regrets?"

"I am only apprehensive, and in truth, somewhat nervous now that I shall come face to face with my—"

"Enemy?" the monk supplied. "You must try not to think of them as such. They are men, the same flesh and blood as you and I—"

"But not the same heart," she interjected.

"That is why we are here." He reached over and patted her hands.

"What are they like?" Color faintly tinged her cheeks. "I would know how they treat their women."

"Do not worry overlong on it. Generally, they are good to their families, though I would warn you of one thing—the *More Danico*."

He rubbed a bristly chin. "You see, in their homeland, a man may take as many wives as he can afford. They are a rather polygamous lot by nature. Even when they embrace our Christian faith, they are reluctant to lay aside this custom, and simply keep handfast wives alongside their legal ones."

"Paramours?"

"In essence. But fear not. Any issue of your union with Atli will be his legitimate heir to Valsemé. You must face the possibility, however, that he may keep other women as well."

"Do not concern yourself for my sake. I almost welcome it. Perhaps he will desire their favors over mine and not bother me overmuch."

Brother Bernard knew that any full-blooded male could not soon forget the exquisite creature that rode next to him. He diverted the conversation into a lighter vein.

"Would it amuse you to learn a few words in the Norse tongue, perhaps a simple greeting that you can share on the morrow?"

The ensuing hours slipped pleasantly by as Brienne contorted her tongue around an impossible combination of sounds, laughing at her ineptitude.

Later, with the camp settled for the night and the coarse provisions eaten, Brienne made her only request of the journey, water for a bath.

She had to content herself with a scrubbing from a large basin set inside her tent. Aleth worked long soaping and rinsing Brienne's hair till it squeaked clean. It took several more hours to dry the silken mass before the campfire.



Esternay watched intently from a distance. Thus far, he had avoided Brienne altogether during the journey, lest she stir his wrath anew. Now he found that it was not his ire that she kindled, but his naked desire.

The simple gown she had donned after bathing clung to her damp, lush curves, and her delicately boned features were pleasantly flushed by the warmth of the fire. As she combed out her glorious black mane, he craved to wrap it about his arm and trap her softness beneath him. She'd infected his blood, turning his veins to fire.

He growled deep in his throat, damning Richard Beaumanoir in his grave once again. The girl should have been his. His! And despite her troublesome nature, he meant to have her.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, reassessing his carefully laid plans, plans that would one day assure him control of Valsemé itself, right in the midst of the Normans. Brienne was the key to those designs.

He continued to watch the maid, deciding upon his course and how best to press his advantage. Most likely, she would be as desirous of the liaison as he. His offer, of course, was irresistible. Freedom from the Norman yoke, and rule of the barony.

He smiled, skimming a glance over her inviting curves once again. Of course, there was a price, but he held no doubt that she would prefer his touch to those of a Norse jackal. Indeed, her terror of the Norsemen would serve him well. Esternay measured Brienne closely, confidently, as she chatted with the little cripple, her laughter a soft melody against the night. She was a delectable morsel, and one he intended to savor for many years to come.



At length, Brienne returned to her tent. She collapsed on her pallet, refreshed and tingling to the tips of her toes, and quickly nodded off.

As the night skies lifted their heavy veils, Brienne nudged Aleth awake to begin preparations for the new day.

Dashing her face with cool water, she wondered briefly of Gruel Atli and whether he would be present among his men. No mention of it had been made. Still, she must leave nothing to chance.

In a few short hours, the escort would pass into Normandy and her life would change forevermore. Brienne knew if she was to succeed in influencing these people, she must establish herself at the outset. Today, she represented her kingdom as Frank met Norman, but even more, she embodied the very essence of Valsemé. She was part of a yesterday that once was, a part that would triumph again in that joining.

God grant her strength. Despite the nobility of the cause, the reality truly repulsed her.

Time slipped swiftly away and the call to mount their steeds sounded. Esternay strode boldly to the women's tent smiling inwardly to himself as he envisioned Brienne recoiling before her new masters when he presented her to them later that day. He would seize the moment and salve her fears, offering her fresh hope, and more, oh, so much more.

Moments later he swallowed that smugness as Brienne stepped forth from her tent.

She was stunningly gowned in a rich tunic, deeply cut and the color of a fine crimson wine. Unlike the voluminous garments currently favored, the gown molded her contours snugly then fell gracefully to her knees over an ivory chemise. Both were lavishly embroidered about the neck, sleeves, and hem with wide borders of purest gold thread. An exquisite girdle, studded with garnets and pearls, lay atop her hips, accentuating her tiny waist.

Brienne's ebony tresses cascaded luxuriantly past her shoulders like a midnight waterfall, crowned with a circlet of gold. The band was set with a single gemstone, a large ruby, centered above her brows. To the back, the circlet secured a sheer golden veil that fell in misty layers nearly to the ground.

Esternay stared greedily at the vision before him. *Soon, my dove, soon.*



The entourage abandoned the old Roman road, which it had followed for nearly a week, proceeding now along a much narrower route that wound through lush meadowland and open orchards.

Brother Bernard joined the women, who were still ensconced in the center of the escort, offering his encouragement and briefly reviewing the greeting Brienne had prepared in the Norse tongue.

A short while later, the retinue entered a little valley where its steeply sloping sides cradled the ruins of a once palatial Roman villa.

As the horses and carts cautiously descended the rutted road, Brienne spied a great gnarled tree near the ruins, incredible in size, impossibly massive in its girth.

"Yggdrasil," she marveled softly.

Brother Bernard had taught her a smattering of the Norse religious beliefs to break the monotony of their journey. This mammoth oak recalled his tales of the great World Ash of Asgard, Yggdrasil, a gigantic tree bearing up the universe. Among its numerous fascinations were two wells located beneath its roots.

Mimir watched over the Well of Wisdom, and it was to him that Odin sacrificed an eye for a draught of the magical pool. The Norns dwelt by the Well of Fate and tended men's destinies. Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld by name, they personified the Past, Present, and Future.

How appropriate, Brienne reflected, for undoubtedly this was the rendezvous. What mischief did the Fates weave for her?

She quickly scanned the grounds below and caught sight of a large host of men mounting their steeds near the crumbling walls and reassembling beneath the mighty oak, Normans to be sure, red and golden of hair. An icy finger of memory traced down her spine.

As the Frankish column neared the bottom of the valley, the road straightened and Brienne could no longer see ahead past the hulking soldiers. Shortly, the retinue came to a standstill and waited to be signaled forward. She surmised that Esternay was now advancing with his select retainers to meet the Norman complement in the open field.

Brienne bit her lower lip. The moment was at hand and she did not know if she could still her pounding heart.

Time weighed heavily upon their idleness. The men's saddles creaked as they strained to see, and they mumbled among themselves. Ghostly images of a smiling, black-haired heathen floated before her mind's eye, and she fought down her rising panic as the aromas of grasses, horses, and leather bombarded her senses.

Leveque suddenly appeared at her side, his pride and concern for her reflected clearly in his hazel eyes.

"We have spoken with the Normans, my lady. You are bid forward to make your presence known."

Brienne froze momentarily, unable to move. She watched dazedly as the troops parted on command to either side of the road, creating a pathway before her. Aleth squeezed her hand, then extracted the whining pup from its basket. Leveque nodded solemnly for her to begin.

Swallowing hard, she pressed Candra forward, feeling much like a lamb approaching a den of hungry wolves.

For the love of God, for the love of my people, she chanted silently, over and over. *Dear God, do not abandon me.*

As she approached the front of the Frankish lines, Brienne gained her first close look at the men of the North. Larger than the Franks and powerful in build, they were not wholly unpleasant to look upon. They were a fair-haired lot for the most part, and not a few favored scarlet mantles.

Brienne continued toward Esternay and Brother Bernard who sat astride a roan and a gray, conversing with the Norse leader, entirely blocking her view of the man. She wondered wildly if this was Gruel Atli.

Her pulse quickened and her mind raced, barely capable of coherent thought. She dropped her gaze, feeling stripped bare under the curious stares and open assessment of the Norman host.

With a start, she realized that Esternay and Brother Bernard had reined their mounts aside. She was left face-to-face . . . with whom?

Slowly, Brienne lifted her eyes but for a moment could go no further than the powerful stallion, as satiny black as Candra was silken white. Then, inhaling deeply, she willed her eyes upward over the expansive chest and astonishingly wide shoulders to look fully upon the Norseman's countenance.

She could not breathe for several seconds, only stare speechless. Never had she seen such a man. Like some glorified hero acclaimed in the legends of old, he was a magnificent golden warrior. Dear God, why did he have to be a Norman!

His steel-blue eyes locked with hers and an energy passed between them, igniting ripples of warmth through her trembling limbs. She wondered breathlessly if this was the man who held her future.

He released his gaze then swept an appreciative glance downward to her feet and back again, like a gentle caress. She flushed warmly as he paused at her breasts. Shockingly, they grew taut under his intimate appraisal. His eyes widened a fraction, and for a moment Brienne wondered if it were possible to die of acute embarrassment.

How dare he examine her like some prize bauble! Did males never see more to a woman than a passive plaything to warm their beds? Well, passive she was not. She was fully capable of returning like for like. When his eyes captured hers again, she smiled winsomely and initiated her own bold perusal of his splendid frame.

Briefly, she traced over the finely hewn features and square set of his jaw, lingering at the enticing cleft of his chin. She moistened her lips then allowed her gaze to slip lower, skimming over the sleeveless suede jerkin of dove-gray to explore thickly muscled arms wrapped in the spiral embrace of silver arm bracelets.

As her eyes roamed across the flat abdomen, Esternay cleared his throat sharply. Her eyes flew upward and were claimed at once by the Norman's captivating smile and a quizzically arched brow.

Brienne bestowed a full smile upon the golden man, catching in her side vision the ominous scowl that now darkened Esternay's mien.

"*Velkominn.*" The voice was beautifully rich.

Brother Bernard hastened to make the introductions. "My lady, may I present to you Rurik, eldest son of Gruel Atli. He bids you welcome."

Disappointment crushed down on her, but she fought to not betray her feelings. How could she have been so childish to hope for even an instant that this man was her betrothed? She puzzled at the strong, physical response he evoked from her, causing her to forget that he was a Northman and deserving of all her hatred. Yet he was a man all the same. Flesh and blood, was that not what the good monk said?

"My lady, he bids you welcome," Brother Bernard prompted, urging with his look that she should begin her speech.

A thousand thoughts swirled through Brienne's mind. Her lips parted then closed, the strands of memories demanding a new course. She lifted her chin and met his gaze directly.

"I am Brienne Beaumanoir, by birthright Baronne de Valsemé. 'Tis I who bid you welcome to my ancestral homeland and to those lands your people now claim. May the Norman rule prove wise and worthy of my forefathers."

Brother Bernard's eyes rounded. "My lady, we dare not provoke—"

"Tell him exactly." Her tone brooked no argument.

Brother Bernard grumbled to himself, then began conveying her message in the odd tongue. A gleam lit in Rurik's eyes, and his reply set the monk to sputtering.

"My lady, Rurik thanks you for your generous greeting. He asks that you would settle a question that plagues him overmuch."

Brienne nodded.

"Forgive me, my lady, these Normans are rather blunt—"

Brienne frowned, impatient.

"He wonders why a woman so beautiful and, ahem . . . obviously desirable as yourself was locked away in a house of virgins."

Brienne's mouth dropped open, but she quickly recovered herself as a surge of mischievousness bubbled up. "My father sought to save me from the Northmen."

As the reply was translated, Rurik smiled broadly, showing even white teeth, then issued a rejoinder. Brother Bernard blustered incoherently for a moment.

"My lady, he says, to the contrary; 'twould seem your father saved you *for* the Northmen."

Esternay sliced through the repartee, barely suppressing the fury that consumed him. The chit slavered over the heathen like a bitch in heat!

"Enough of your bantering, Lady Brienne. You are dismissed. Return to your position in the column at once."

His words stunned Brienne. "My lord, if I have offended any—"

"Offended?" Esternay snapped. "You are either amazingly naive or appallingly wanton. If you continue to encourage the man, you'll next find him between your thighs!"

Brienne recoiled at his crassness, astounded. Had the man gone utterly mad?

Brother Bernard gasped, his eyes darting nervously over the towering Normans. "My lord, 'tis unwise—"

"Silence!" Esternay hissed, emboldened since the foreigners could not understand his Frankish tongue. He glowered at Brienne. "We shall finish this matter later. Your years in cloister have left you surprisingly lacking in the finer points of gentility." He signaled brusquely for one of his men-at-arms to remove her.

Rurik suddenly spurred his mount forward between the maid and menacing knight, catching up Candra's reins and swiftly drawing Brienne aside.

Esternay's hand flew to his sword hilt, but the monk stayed him.

Rurik glared coldly at the Frank, the blue tinge of his eyes draining to a flinty gray. When next he spoke, Brienne detected a dangerous undercurrent to his incomprehensible words.

"Sire, we are to depart at once." Brother Bernard mopped his brow. "The Lady Brienne is to ride with Rurik and an escort equal in number of Normans and Franks. He bids you choose ten."

"Tell this arrogant bastard that I represent the king," Esternay snarled. "The lady is my charge and shall remain under my protection until she is wed. I'll share her with no cockscomb of a Northman till then."

Rurik's eyes glinted like polished steel. Before another word could be uttered, he bellowed a string of commands.

Two dozen of his men promptly encircled the small group of Franks that stood in the open field, hands poised, ready to unsheath their blades.

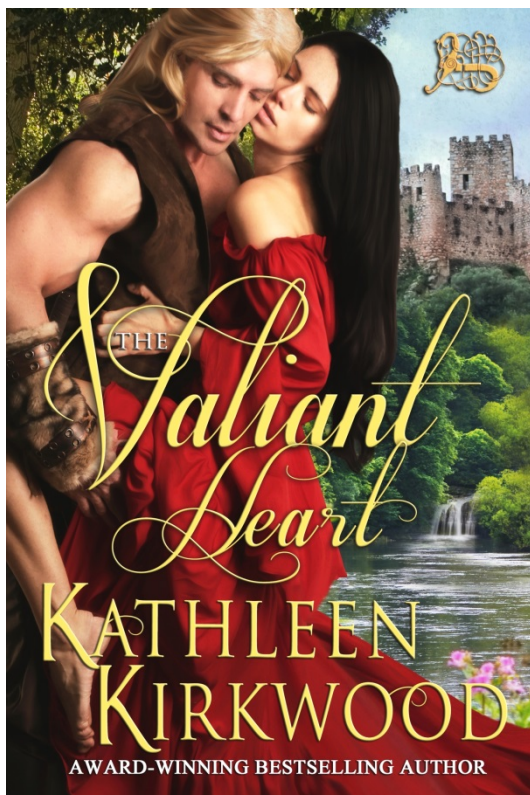
Brienne wavered at the sight and searched Rurik's stony face.

The monk hastily signed himself. "Seigneur, 'twas no request. We are in Normandy now."

End of Sample

The Story Continues!

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The Valiant Heart

by

Kathleen Kirkwood

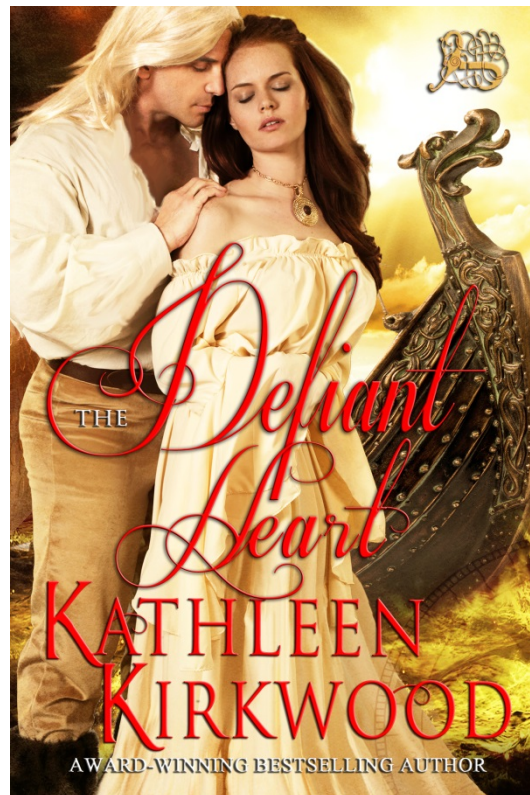
The Defiant Heart

By

Anita Gordon

Writing as

Kathleen Kirkwood



Dedication

For my children, Kimberly, Scott, and Christopher. You've always been and continue to be the precious lights of my life. And for our grandsons, Sean, Beau, Connor, Aidyn, Nicholas and James, and for Ligia, our daughter-in-law, and Brian, our son-in-law, you add sparkle and shine to my life all the more.

Author's Appreciation

A very special thanks to Jim Shellem for his nautical expertise and advice, not only in editing the pertinent scenes, but as the “architect” of the sea battle.

Additional thanks to Linda Douglas for her help in Lyting's and Deira's scene at Gelandri.

Also, warm and very special thanks to my parents, Jim and Betty Barbour for the “care and feeding of the muse” while laboring in the face of her deadline and she needed a place of peace and quiet to tuck herself away. You're the best.

Note on pronunciation: Once again, I have used Icelandic (Íslensk) which preserves the language of the ninth-century Norsemen. The character “ð” is pronounced like the th-sound in “the”; “Þ” is pronounced like the th-sound in “thin”; and “æ” is pronounced “i” as in “like.”



PART 1

A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine.

“From the fury of the Norsemen deliver us, O Lord!”

Prologue

The North Sea, 915 A.D.

The mighty fleet of *drakken* swept north, carving the fogbound sea. Swift and silent they coursed, triumphant high-prowed dragonships, their hulls heavy with plunder—serpents in the mists.

Onward they plowed through trackless ocean and sunless haze, bearing their precious cargo—ivory, gold, and womanly flesh—far from the Isle of Eire, far to where gelid shores and hoarfrost lairs brinked the earth.

A horn brayed long and deep, sending chills to crawl over Ailinn as the lead vessel signaled its companions through the curtain of gray. The others quickly took up the call and repeated the blast from stern to stern till the waters vibrated with the sound of trumpeting beasts.

Ailinn drew the mist-sodden blanket about young Lia and hugged her close. “Shush, love. Rest now,” she soothed.

Lia shuddered beneath Ailinn’s arms, but her cries quieted to a broken snuffle.

Heavyhearted, Ailinn laid her cheek against her stepcousin’s small, dark head and closed her eyes. She breathed the dank sea air and listened to the muffled sobs of the women about her. Listened to the rhythmic drub of a wooden rod as a Norseman smote his buckler over and over, pacing the oarsmen’s strokes.

“May God remember us in our hour of need,” Ailinn prayed softly over Lia. “May God protect —”

Ailinn swallowed her words against the knot of anger that rose in her breast. For a countless time this day she shuttered her heart against the pain, against the horrors that burned in her soul.

Where was the Almighty in those desperate moments before dawn? Why did God hold back his hand when the blood-thirsting devils descended upon Clonmel? Why?

She squeezed her lashes against a fresh flow of tears. Still, they trickled paths over her cheeks. Instinctively Ailinn rocked Lia in her arms, a gentle, comforting motion.

Cold. She was so cold. And so very tired. ‘Twas a chill and a weariness that only one who had passed through the darkness of death and the shadows of Hell could know. If there remained one shred of gratitude she could lift heavenward, ‘twas that Fianna, her mother, and Lorcan, her stepfather, did not live to see Munster ripped wide by Danish blades. Would that God had seen her to her own grave with them and spared her this agony.

Ailinn thrust aside her self-pity. Her heart ached for her stepcousins. Lia and Deira had witnessed their parents lying in a pool of blood, their father with his head crushed and their mother savaged. Rhiannon had shrieked wildly for her father, the overking. He was a dauntless, hard-bitten warrior. Still, there was no sight of him when they were dragged from the compound with the other women.

Sweet Jesu, the sight of it!—everything hacked to pieces. In their contempt the Norsemen hewed down every object and beast that misfortuned to occupy the walled yard. All about lay the wreckage of implements, furniture, and crockery. Huts were torched and pens smashed down. Blooded hounds cluttered the yard. Everywhere there was death. Ailinn saw those she’d known from her youth lying vacant-eyed, their lives poured out on Eire’s sweet earth. Many more were beyond recognition.

The preparations for the bridal feast, so joyfully made the day before, lay in ruin. Sprays of hawthorn, decorating the doors and walls of buildings, shriveled with heat as flames devoured the structures and those who had fallen within.

Longships—dozens upon dozens—awaited, blackening the River Suir. Ailinn was boarded with the others and shackled to the thick mast. As the ships slid away, she watched the billowing smoke climb the skies over Clonmel.

Ailinn shivered as she tasted the salt of her tears. A breeze stirred and teased a strand of auburn hair across her face. Dragging it down, she squinted her eyes open to seek Deira and Rhiannon. Instead, her gaze met with the hard, flinty stare of the man called Hakon.

She stiffened with revulsion and loathing. God willing, she would kill the cur with her own hands given the chance. 'Twas he who had slain their maid, Bergette, and violated Deira and Rhiannon before her very eyes.

Ailinn averted her face and stared gloomily into the mist. Fresh currents of guilt surged through her. 'Twas, in part, her own actions that provoked the Norseman to lay hold of her stepcousins and defile them so savagely. Even now as she glanced to them, Rhiannon clawed her with eyes sharp as talons, then gave Ailinn her back as she slipped a comforting arm about Deira.

Pain lanced through Ailinn and stung her heart. She grieved for them both and for all the women who suffered the dark lusts of the Northmen. None had escaped, not even young Lia. None, save herself alone.

She glanced to the ship's graying chieftain, a massive, grizzled warrior—Skallagrim, she'd heard the others name him. 'Twas he who claimed possession of her despite Hakon's heated protests. Whatever his intent, Skallagrim neither pleased himself upon her nor allowed his men sport of her.

Ailinn felt the weight of Hakon's steady, piercing gaze. A chill curled along her spine. She feared he yet purposed to have her.

In that first, horrifying moment, when the Norsemen burst through the chamber door, her eyes had beheld Hakon's crimsoned blade flashing. Flashing its terrible downward stroke as he severed Bergette's life. Ailinn screamed at the butchery, drawing Hakon's attention upon herself. In a heartbeat he leapt for her, yet she fought him with a frenzied strength as pure, unholy terror erupted through her. The fine bride's veil and crown of hyacinth ripped from her hair beneath his hands as she wrenched free and fled for the door. In the next breath she slammed into the hardened chest of a huge, brutish Northman who reeked of smoke, sweat, and death.

Ailinn's blood ran cold as Skallagrim held her in his iron grip and ran a gauging eye over her. Hakon argued hotly with her captor while their comrades began to push into the small room and lay hold of the young women there. Though Ailinn understood naught of their twisted tongue, Hakon plainly deemed her his prize and demanded her back.

But Skallagrim refused to release her, using his authority to end the matter. 'Twas then in the heat of his anger that Hakon seized Deira and ravaged her. He next laid hold to Rhiannon. The heathens abused the other maidens as well, swiftly, brutally, shouting their coarse pleasure. Several flaunted the stained gowns of the virgins they sullied, pleased with the spoils of conquest.

At that, Skallagrim studied Ailinn a long, considering moment. He marked the bridal array that adorned her—the unblemished gown, the remnants of bruised blossoms that yet clung in her hair. A light came into his flat eyes and his craggy, bearded face spread with a grin as though he had found some great treasure. With Ailinn secure in his grip, he hauled her from the building and down to the River Suir.

Lia tensed against Ailinn, netting her back to the moment. She looked up to see Hakon unfold to his full height. He stepped forward with sure footage on the forging deck.

Ailinn's heart thudded against her ribs as his gaze prowled over them. She tightened her grip on Lia, but he only rumbled a sound deep in his throat, then moved past to the rear of the ship, where he replaced the man at the steering board.

Ailinn vented her breath. Gently she fingered back a tangle of hair from Lia's pale cheek.

"As pas de peur, ma chère cousine. Reposes-toi," Ailinn calmed, unmindful she had slipped into Frankish.

She, Lia, and Deira had learned the tongue at their nurse's knee and exercised it most often to share a confidence or voice their griefs. Now the familiar words rushed forth, consoling in some wise—old friends, intimate and dear.

Lia quieted once more as Ailinn soothed her fingers through the girl's sable tresses. What would come of them, she brooded—Lia, Deira, Rhiannon, the maidens of Clonmel, herself? Were the remainder of their days foredoomed to enslavement and submission among the heathens? And Skallagrim—what plans did he hold for her? Surely, he spared her apurpose. Though she loathed to concede it, for the

moment her safety lay with the rugged chieftain. But her kinswomen and friends she was powerless to aid.

Dspirited, Ailinn began to sing softly, lulling Lia with an old strain that was tinged with a sadness peculiar to Gaelic melodies. Her crystalline voice carried along the ship's length and drifted out over the deep waters. The men fell silent. Even the oar-pacer muted his strokes.

Tears ached in Ailinn's throat, but her voice never faltered. Once anew, she thanked Heaven above that her mother and stepfather had not lived to suffer this day or witness her fate. She embraced their memory and held them dear. For the briefest of moments she recalled her mother as she lay dying, her husband's and daughter's hands clasped within her own thin strength.

"Hold fast, my dearest Ailinn," Fianna heartened. "Sometimes the darkness holds the light."

Ailinn staved the memories before their keen edge pared too close. Lifting her gaze, she beheld her new masters. They wore the blood of her people.

Raw, mordant anger churned Ailinn's soul. What small light remained in her life after Fianna's and Lorcan's deaths today went out altogether. In the darkness that engulfed her world, she knew only a scalding hatred for all Norsemen. Her body they might use and break, but in her heart she vowed ever to remain defiant.

As the ships sliced the waters for distant shores, Ailinn ended her song. "I am sorry, Mother. Night has fallen and I cannot see beyond. There is no one to aid me or bring forth the hope of dawn."

Hedeby, Danmark

A bright smile slashed Lyting's sun-coppered features as he leapt from the prow of the *Sea Falcon* to the wharf's solid planking. 'Twas good to be in Hedeby once more.

As he secured the ship to one of the stout bollards, he scanned the bustling quayside with its colorful mix of humanity.

Já, 'twas good, he avowed warmly, his pulse quickening to the pace that thrummed along the dock and on through the town. This voyage would be his last for many a year to come—a final excursion before his return to Normandy. Then would he set forth for Corbie and begin studies under the Benedictines, bound by Holy Rule.

Mayhap, in time, he would yet return to these shores.

With a staunch yank he finished lashing the lines and glanced back to the sleek ship. Lyting's grin widened. His sister-in-law, Brienne, and her friend, Aleth, gaped from their perch. The scene before them, he imagined, was wholly unlike any they'd ever witnessed in their native Francia.

Hedeby. Gateway of Denmark. Mistress of trade and crossroad of the North. The town nested in a ring of heavy defense works on the Schlei fjord which cut deep across the narrow foot of the Jutland peninsula. Traffic intersected her boundaries east from the Baltic and west from the North Sea. Along the military road, Hærvejen, goods flowed north and south.

Lyting looked on with amusement as Brienne nudged Aleth, pointing out a man who ambled along the pier in wide, baggy pants gathered below his knees. Aleth, in turn, gasped at the necklace one woman wore, an extravagant piece crowded with large rock crystals, set in silver mountings.

The planks shuddered beneath Lyting as his brother, Rurik, jumped to the wharf beside him. An instant later Aleth's husband, Ketil, appeared above them shouldering a narrow wooden ramp.

Lyting tossed a spiritous glance from one to the other as he helped brace down the thick board. "Best secure the keys to your coffers. Your wives look ready to spend last year's gain."

Ketil guffawed in his flaming red beard, his broken features crinkling. "And what better enjoyment than for a man to squander a bit of coin on his lady? 'Twill be most happily rewarded in the end." He winked, then leaned forward to cast Lyting a purposeful nod. "Mind, 'twould do you well to find a warm and lovesome maid and bind yourself there. Far better than the cold stone walls you seek," he said, dispensing his all-too-frequent advice.

Rurik chuckled deep and rich as Ketil withdrew. "Marriage agrees with our friend. Who would have thought that such a wisp of a girl as Aleth could tame that bear?"

Lyting shared the laugh, his smile lingering as his golden brother mounted the plank to rejoin his wife in the ship. Rurik dropped a kiss to Brienne's lips, then a second to the small, dark head asleep at her breast. Aleth moved to Rurik's side just then, bearing a second child, identical to the first, and gave the mite over to his father.

A warm pride swelled through Lyting as he looked on the Baron and Baronne de Valsemé as they stood with their young heirs and gazed toward. Norse and Frank, they tarried, content in each other's presence. *Nei*, Norman, Lyting amended, melded by heart and blood.

Danish by birth, Lyting and his brothers had grown to manhood in Jutland's north on the inlets and broads of the Limfjord. Their father, Gruel Atli, warred for a decade in Francia alongside their famed uncle, Rollo, and the Norsemen of the Seine.

Nearly four years past, the Frankish king, Charles, came to terms with Rollo, granting him both fiefdom and title and creating for him a coveted place within the ranks of Frankish aristocracy as Duke of

Normandy. For their part, Rollo and his men agreed to defend Charles's realm and take the waters of Holy Baptism.

In his stead, Rollo awarded Atli for his loyalty with the barony of Valsemé, the former holding of Richard Beaumanoir, Brienne's father. Atli did not enjoy the fruits of his warring for long. Scarcely did Lyting arrive from Limfjord and Rurik return from his travels in the East than their father died. With his last words Atli conferred the barony and his untouched bride—Brienne—to Rurik's keeping.

Yet, 'twas a position swift challenged. Jealousies and treacheries ran deep within the barony. The blood of the brothers spilled upon the blade—so much, near lost.

Near lost. Lyting touched the faint scar that lined his cheek, his gaze drifting to Brienne.

"By the Mass!" Ketil's oath ruptured his thoughts. "Did you bring your full worth?" He grunted as he hoisted a small, iron-clad chest from the cargo hold onto the deck's planking. "'Tis a rock, Lyting."

Lyting shook free the old specters and crossed over the ramp. "There will be little need for coin or goods where I am destined," he tossed easily, smiling. "And I have brought my wealth a purpose."

"Destined indeed," Ketil rumbled, poised to argue the point. But when Lyting forbore him a glance, Ketil harnessed his tongue.

His lips twitched beneath the curling blaze that shrouded his face. "Say you, 'a purpose'?" Ketil notched a brow at Lyting, then bent to retrieve a second trunk from storage. "Mayhap you shall yet restore my confidence and lavish the treasure on some fair damsel."

"Have heart, Ketil," Rurik called back as he aided Brienne down the ramp. "'Tis burdensome enough that Brother Bernard watches henlike over Lyting, sparing his virtue all earthly temptation. But you are ever eager to thrust every unpledged maid onto his path."

Barely suppressed laughter rippled through the baron's crew and men-at-arms who labored to make fast the *Sea Falcon*, preparing to haul her ashore.

"And well he should have heeded my advice on the day I wed Aleth," Ketil persisted. "There is no want of maidens in Normandy who would welcome him to their arms *and* beds. 'Twould be of little surprise should Hedeby's daughters prove as ardent."

Lyting shook his head good-naturedly and began to interrupt Ketil's discourse, but his friend gave him no pause.

"That snow-bright hair of yours tempts the women as honey does flies," Ketil gestured to the exceptional white mane that spilled past Lyting's shoulders. "I held hope 'twas to that end that you avoided my lady's shears of late. Forsooth, you look as fierce as any of our battle-hungry kindred gone *i viking*. Women admire men of courage and steel," he asserted with a stout nod of his head. "Especially the lustrous maids of Danmark."

"Oh, Ketil." Aleth wagged her head, a soft smile etching her features. "Grant Lyting a measure of peace and do come along."

Aleth turned to Rurik as he remounted the plank and accepted his outstretched hand. Leaning upon his strength, she allowed him to assist her ashore.

Eager to follow his diminutive wife, Ketil caught up several bundles from the hold and motioned for Lyting to aid him with the solid chest that stood between them. Together, they took up the weight and crossed the deck.

"Do not be disheartened, my friend," Lyting cheered as they descended. With a shrug of hard-muscled shoulder, he repositioned the small coffer of riches so that it rode more securely against the curve of his neck. "This is for no silken-thighed temptress but for one of true metal and a voice that fair rings to the heavens. 'Tis the Bell of Saint Anskar I seek."

"Bell? What need have you of a bell?" Ketil's brows hoisted apart.

"Have you heard naught of blessed Saint Anskar?" Lyting beamed him a glance as they gained the wharf. "He established a church at Hedeby this century past and furnished it with a fine bell. When Anskar died, so did his mission. 'Tis said the church yet stands, boasting its bell. 'Tis my intent to make fair purchase of the piece for Valsemé's own church. Again, there is little use for coin when I enter the cloistered walls of Corbie."

“Corbie. Bell. Bah! ‘Tis no bell you need, but a flesh-and-blood woman. A flesh-and-blood woman who will help you *ring* your blessed bell of Saint Anskar!”

Ahead of them, Rurik and Brienne broke into gales of laughter. Their twins looked on them in wonder, then, caught up in the merriment, joined with peals of unrestrained delight.

The small party of Normans threaded their way through the crowds and carts that choked the waterfront. Arabs in long, fluid robes strolled the docks, some stopping to haggle slave prices with Rus traders who offered sturdy young Slavs. Frisians, garbed in striped tunics and possessing long wilting mustaches, bartered fine Rhenish glassware from straw-packed barrels.

Lyting and Ketil exchanged glances to see how prominently the merchants of Sverige figured among the Danes this season. Hedeby changed masters with regularity these days, Lyting acknowledged soberly, a bedeviled state spawned years past when the Swedish king, Olaf, seized control of the market-town. Thenceforth, Hedeby had passed back and forth, between Swede and Dane, in an endless power struggle to control the bounty that trafficked her borders.

For all that, Hedeby prospered and life proceeded largely undisturbed. Though it might rub his Dane’s pride, ‘twas the Swedes who had fortified her with defense works. And likewise, through them, that the most exotic of goods flowed—luxuries from Byzantium, the Bulgar Khaganates, and the Caliphates of Baghdad.

Ketil gave a snort, drawing Lyting’s attention to one Swede who dangled a bauble before a shapely Danish maid. She trilled a small laugh as he folded the trinket into her palm. But at the same moment her gaze fell on Lyting and her lips fell open. The Swede twisted round to follow the maid’s interest. Icily he flicked an impatient glare over Lyting, then turned back, shifting his stance to block the maid’s view.

Lyting caught the flash of white teeth cutting a swathe through Ketil’s beard.

“*Nei*, friend. Not a word,” he warned but was hard put to temper the grin from his own face.

From above, a horn sounded, long and deep, drawing Lyting’s gaze to the earthen rampart that rose over Hedeby and to the watchtowers atop it. Again, the horn resonated, rich and full-bodied, signaling ships arrived from the sea.

The oddest of presentiments rippled along Lyting’s spine as he turned to view the palisaded harbor.

“Let us hope they be not more Sverige-men,” Ketil gruffed.

Lyting watched as the first warship slipped through the sea gate, lying low to the waterline, its serpent’s prow gleaming.

Keen of sight, he marked the boisterous celebration onboard. The sea warriors axed open casks, ladling up horns full of ale and hailing those ashore before they swilled the contents. As the oars dipped the waters, the men took turns stepping out upon the shafts and dancing over them along the length of the ship. Their comrades cheered them on, then roared with laughter when they lost their balance and splashed into the Schlei.

Those who accomplished the deed rewarded themselves with more drink and gladdened themselves further, pillaging lips and fondling breasts of the female captives chained at the mast.

“*Nei*, friend. Not Sverige-men.” Lyting steeled at the sight. “They’re our own kinsmen, fresh from a raid.”



Shackled together by ankle cuffs and chains, their wrists tethered, the maids of Eire shuffled along the timbered street in a single column.

Ailinn strained to glimpse Deira and Lia where they walked ahead, separated by a dozen or more women. She could not see them. Rhiannon, unhappily, trod directly behind, her tongue no less sharp for her trials.

“Why should these Norsemen favor you above the rest?” she hissed past Ailinn’s shoulder. “Every wretched day since our taking have I struggled on that, choked on that. And though I am ill to think on it further, ‘tis plain. Their greed for gold outweighs the lusts of their loins.”

“Hush, Rhiannon.” Ailinn cautioned in a tight half-whisper. “They keep watch of us. Hold your tongue lest you would see us flogged.”

“Flogged? Not *you*,” Rhiannon bit out. “Not you who they spare of their appetites and suffer no hardship. You, who they cloak warm in wool while the rest of us near freeze upon the open sea. Have you not guessed it?” Rhiannon baited. “They think you to be me—daughter of Mór, princess of the Eóganachts and Domnal’s bride. They see a hearty ransom in that.”

Ailinn clenched her teeth, incredulous at Rhiannon’s assumption.

“How should they know aught of us? These are black-shielded Danes who fell upon Eire like wolves out of the North, not the men of Norge who infest our fair isle. Did you imagine them to have stopped and questioned their Norse kindred before entering the Suir to determine who was who among the Irish? The Norwegians are their foe as much as any. I have heard it in your father’s hall.”

“ ‘Tis as I say, I tell you,” Rhiannon countered. “They chose to attack the compound of a *ruri ri* thinking to find great wealth there.” She jabbed the back of Ailinn’s arm. “They did not know we two exchanged places that morn. They found us in my chamber, did they not? And there you were, wearing *my* wedding mantle, *my* gown, a garland in your hair.”

“Enough, Rhiannon!” Ailinn’s temples throbbed as she attempted to block the dark memories from her mind’s eye. “Even should you have the right of it, who would give ransom now? Who among our menfolk survived the slaughter that soaked the dawn? How can any of us know?”

“Mór lives!” Rhiannon declared fiercely. “And these Norse devils will not treat you so finely once they learn the truth. *Ní hea*.” A gloat coated her voice beneath the words. “Not when they find that their prize captive lacks one drop of Eóganacht blood, royal or otherwise. That she springs only from the Corcu Loígda—the conquered Érainn—footstool of the Eóganachts for centuries past.”

Ailinn’s anger screamed through her veins. “I am sure you will hasten to apprise them and better your condition as swift as you can accomplish it.”

A contented, deep-throated sound reached her from behind, though Rhiannon abstained from comment. Ailinn envisioned the cat who savored its cream. And the one about to swallow its prey.

As they left the quayside to enter the town’s forest of reed-thatched dwellings, Rhiannon’s silence continued to stab at her back, sharp as any two-edged blade.



Lyting hefted the iron caldron into place, suspending it on hook and chain over the room’s central stone-lined hearth. He glanced across the *skali*, the *hus*’s fine main hall, and grinned. Brienne and Aleth yet lingered at the door, ogling the vibrant spectacle of Hedeby’s streets.

Rurik emerged from a back storeroom just then, dusting the dirt from his hands. He glanced to where little Richard and Kylan trotted merrily along the *langpallar*, the raised side-floors that lined the *skali*’s walls. A smile warmed his features as he joined Lyting.

“ ‘Tis a fine lodgment. The lads seem happy enough, and the ladies will be comfortable here for the span of our stay.”

Lyting chuckled. “If they don’t burst with wanting to explore the merchant’s booths and craftsmen’s quarters.”

Rurik’s gaze traveled to the women, and he shared the jest. With a gleam to his eyes he stepped toward the sleeping-platforms. The twins giggled with delight when he held out his arms for them. One after the other they launched themselves at their father’s chest. Catching them up, Rurik held them high in the crook of his arms and jostled them gamesomely, like two little wheat sacks.

“What say you men?” He winked conspiratorially at Lyting as he addressed his sons. “We are finished here for a time—our trunks stored and everything put to rights. Shall we check on the *Sea Falcon* and see if Ketil and the others have secured her ashore? ‘Twould not surprise me if the crew should need your help to set their camp and raise their tents.”

Brienne and Aleth came away from the portal as Rurik addressed Lyting, though he spoke for them to hear.

“The *hus* must still be provisioned, if only for tonight. Mayhap you would be of a mind to escort the ladies about the town. I would do so myself, but with warships in port, I prefer to see to the *Sea Falcon* personally.”

Lyting nodded. “Best we double the watch tonight. I’ll tent with the men and see it done.” Lyting graced Brienne and Aleth with a generous smile. “Meanwhile, perchance, my ladies would accompany me, and we shall discover what pleasantries Hedeby offers this season.”

Amid high spirits and joyous articulations, the women hurried to gather their cloaks from the wall pegs.

“Be mindful to return with some food for the kettle and oil for our lamps,” Rurik teased lightly, then dropped his voice as he skimmed a look to Lyting.

“If there is aught the ladies especially favor, secure it with coin when they are not aware and bid the merchant hold it. Ketil and I will settle with him later.”

Lyting’s eyes sparkled as they departed the *hus*. He turned back and set the key to the lock. “ ‘Twould seem I shall spend this journey laboring to empty both our coffers.”

“Ah, but mayhap you shall find your bell,” Brienne offered brightly.

Lyting straightened to find three widening grins. By their expressions, they clearly held Ketil’s advisements in mind. He began to lift a finger and forestall the all-too-predictable comment when little Richard began to bounce in his father’s arm.

“I help you ring it,” he chirped.

“I ring it,” Kylan joined gleefully.

Lyting squeezed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and shook his head in mock dismay. His shoulders vibrated with silent laughter. The Lord’s Cross, he discovered ever anew, must be borne in many ways.



Lyting’s bootfall sounded bluntly on the wooden walkway as he guided the ladies along the fresh-water rivulet that flowed through the heart of Hedeby.

Houses lined the street cramped one upon another—yards neatly fenced, rooftops nearly touching, attendant sheds and workshops to the back. Rapturous aromas of fresh-baked bread, hearty stews, and grilled fish wafted from open doors to swamp their senses.

For a brief time they wandered. Lyting pointed out curiosities and directed them to tented stalls where visiting merchants spread exotic wares—rare spices and rich brocades, ropes of seal hide and walrus ivory. Brienne took special interest in a belt fashioned with metal plaques from Persia, thinking to gift Rurik. Aleth looked at gaming pieces for Ketil.

Where the lane abutted the main north-south thoroughfare, they turned left and crossed the rivulet. Diverting once more, they entered the craftsmen’s quarters. Brienne and Aleth examined the potter’s bowls, watched the jeweler cut and polish his amber, then lingered over the weaver’s array of *hlað*—colorfully patterned ribbons.

Lyting watched with enjoyment as the women chattered back and forth, excited as two fresh-cheeked maids attending their first fair. While they made their choices, he moved to the horn-carver’s display, hoping to find something fitting for each of them. Something small, thoughtfully chosen. Something by which they might remember their journey here. Remember him. In years to come. Long after he departed Valsemé.

Lyting lifted a handsome, fine-toothed comb and wondered why so cheerful a task should drag at the heart of his soul.

“Red deer.” A voice disrupted his thoughts. “The combs are carved from the antlers of red deer.”

Lyting found a whiskery little man sitting off to the side, whittling an indiscernible object.

“Each is fitted with its own case. There are also needles, spindles, knife handles, and spoons to satisfy any maid. And should you be in need of a fine wool cloak for your heart’s lady, I have several in trade.”

Lyting threw up a hand to halt the man before he attempted to sell him the stool and table as well.

“Two comb sets will do.” He reached for the pouch at his hip, glancing over to the weaver’s shed at the same moment. The women were gone.

Lyting’s heart jolted from his chest as he broke into a run and spanned the distance between the comb-maker’s and weaver’s stands.

“The Frankish noblewomen, where are they?” he demanded sharply, jarring to a halt, every muscle battle-tense.

The weaver clutched a roll of linen to his chest and fell back a pace at the storm on Lyting’s face. With a quick, trembly gesture he pointed toward the end of the row of workshops where it opened to the streetside.

Lyting caught sight of Brienne’s flowing veil and mantle and hastened to reach them. Stuffing his heart back into his chest, he came to a stop beside them, but before he could utter a word, his heart jammed against his ribs once more as he beheld the women’s stricken faces.

He followed their gaze to where a group of sea raiders led their shackled prizes along the wood-paved lane. Females all, the captives scuffed slowly over the planks, dragging the chains that bound their ankles and bit into their flesh. Some sobbed softly while others moved their lips in prayer.

“Oh, Lyting, Lyting.” Brienne gripped his arm, her voice aching with compassion.

Lyting knew that both Rurik and Ketil had taken pains to forewarn their wives that Hedeby was a major slave market. Still, to witness the wretched plight of these women was more than either could bear.

Brienne’s grip tightened, bringing his eyes to meet hers—great violet orbs, filled with her heart.

“Oh, Lyting. Cannot we help just *one*?”

A faint memory whispered, cautioning that the last time Brienne so pleaded for his aid, and in similar tone, it very near cost him his life. But even as he heeded that dim warning, his gaze fell upon an auburn-haired beauty, her face the gift of angels, her form exquisitely modeled and temptingly displayed in her clinging gown. She held herself proudly, defiant, a fierce courage upon her brow.

Unbidden, his feet carried him forward.



“These dogs will rue the day they laid hand to a daughter of Mór.” Rhiannon chafed Ailinn’s ear as they moved along the walk. “I shall gain my freedom, heed my words. And once ransomed, I shall exact my vengeance. ‘Twill then be Norsemen who empty their lifeblood upon stout Celtic blades.”

Ailinn’s patience neared its end. Rhiannon embroidered retribution with every step she took, envisioning and savoring a conquest that could never exist beyond the scope of her own imaginings. Did Rhiannon’s venom so blind her? Naught would ever be the same, even should she return to Eire’s green shores.

Bone weary and nerves rubbed raw, Ailinn resolved to set the matter to her stepcousin straight forth. Bluntness was all Rhiannon truly understood. ‘Twas unhealthy to nurture disillusion, if not starkly dangerous. They must acknowledge the reality of their plight if they ever hoped to survive it.

“These Danes should have taken more care,” Rhiannon continued. “Domnal will one day rule from the Rock of Cashel and command the armies of Munster. He shall avenge me, his bride, and prove himself the Northmen’s bane.”

Ailinn could tolerate no more. “Rhiannon, take the sunbeam from your eye. You have been sullied at the hands of the Northmen. Domnal will no longer want you.”

Rhiannon fell deathly silent. But a breath of a moment later, pain knifed across Ailinn’s ankle as she felt her fetters hard yanked from behind, her step short-chained.

Ailinn spilled forward, barely breaking the fall with tethered hands as the ground rushed up to meet her. Palms, elbows, and thighs stung as she landed facedown with a distinct “woof,” the air forced out of her. She shook her head, raising upright slightly, and found herself staring at two booted feet.

Ailinn began to push away, but a warm hand closed about her upper arm while a second encompassed her opposite hand in sure, solid strength. Tiny tremors chased through her, one trailing quickly upon another, as she felt herself drawn upward.

The boots passed from view, and her eyes encountered iron-forged legs encased in snug fitting breeches—long legs, appearing momentarily without end.

But as she rose farther, they disappeared beneath a fine cloth tunic—this, sword-belted over abdomen and hip. Her gaze traveled higher, skimming the trim line of body past the cinctured waist to a steely expanse of chest and shoulder.

Ailinn's breath grew shallow. Her hand burned within her captor's hold. Tilting up her chin, she swept her gaze over the tanned column of neck, square cut of jaw, then upward the final distance to behold crystal blue eyes and hair . . . hair as bright as day.

Ailinn wavered, her bone gone to liquid, and sought to regain her footage. The man's hand slipped at once from her arm to the small of her back to steady her. In so doing he pressed her closer and held her a scarce whisper apart.

She dared look on him again, tracing the clean lines of his face, so strikingly handsome. The man possessed a leonine quality, dangerously male and not to be underestimated. Yet it was his eyes, more beautiful than most, that held her captive. They penetrated the depths of her, as if to strip her bare to the core and lay open her heart.

A blur of movement caught the edge of her vision, alerting Ailinn to Hakon's approach. Beyond his shoulder she spied Skallagrim watching, close-faced.

Without word the man released her. He ran a long gaze over her, then grazed her eyes with an intense, unreadable look. Drawing forth his coin pouch, he turned to Hakon.

Ailinn's pulse raced. The man intended to purchase her! In an instant, the dreamlike haze that enveloped her dissipated and reality clattered hard down upon her once more. She darted her gaze about her, collecting the images to heart—knots of townspeople lining the lane, coarsely assessing them; her kinswomen herded like animals, manacled and abused; and their captors, the murderous pagans who had ravaged Munster and enslaved them.

Like a storm on the horizon her fury gathered, swift and terrible. She brought her eyes to the man who purposed to buy her and saw him for the first time for what he truly was—a heathenous Dane, fierce and untamed. His incredible snowfall of hair spilled to mid-chest with barbarous effect. Upon his cheek he bore a scar, token of a violent past.

Ailinn castigated herself for every heated tremor he stirred to life within her. He was no different from the rest. And here he stood, brazenly offering coin for her. To what purpose, if not to fill his bed with her and abuse her there?

As the man turned to face her, a tempest of emotion erupted within Ailinn. The horrors and outrages of the past week surged forth and overwhelmed her. She met his eyes with icy contempt. Then, in the full gale of her fury, she spat on him.



Lyting fell back a pace, stunned by the maid's vehemence. She sliced him with a look of unveiled loathing, as though he alone were responsible for the misfortune of her people.

Slowly he wiped the moisture from his cheek, locking his eyes with hers—large, brown eyes, dark about the rims but golden within their centers, warmed with honey. Rich auburn hair tumbled in disarray about a heart-shaped face, the features delicate, refined, the skin flawless as cream beneath the smudges.

Lord in His mercy, but she was a magnificent creature. All the more ravishing in the high grip of her anger. Lyting braced himself against the fire that swept through his veins. Her spirit was unbroken, and that suddenly pleased him.

“What price do you set on this woman?” Lyting angled a glance to the sea raider who stood right of him.

“ ‘Twould appear she does not wish *you* for her master.” The man's mouth dragged upward, the words more barb than jest. Lyting sharpened his focus on the seaman, caring naught for his tone.

The man burned with brash confidence, legs spread apart and arms crossed chest level. He bore no great height but looked hard as stone. His hair shone dully of tarnished gold, and a month's worth of growth covered his jaw.

“I would have her nonetheless.” Lyting weighted his words evenly.

The man gauged him with darkening eyes for one brief but deliberate moment. He then broke away his gaze and took an unhurried step toward the maid. He cupped her chin, but she wrenched from his touch, recoiling. He merely chuckled and brushed his fingertips along her neck.

A burr climbed Lyting's back. The man reminded him all too well of another. Another whose name was no longer spoken in the barony. Their physical aspects were markedly different, yet the two were of a kind. Predators.

"This one is not for purchase," the man breathed, a hard glitter to his eyes. "But there are others to choose from."

"None other will do," Lyting clipped.

The sea raider narrowed his gaze, wolflike. "Then you need be content without her. She is not mine to sell, and her owner holds plans for her." Something obscure flickered in his eyes. "Be assured, she shall be well used."



Ailinn started when Hakon crouched to unlock her ankle chains. Rising again, he grasped her by the arm and hauled her from the line. As he led her away, she cast back a frantic, searching glance for her stepcousins. Instead, she met the dazzling intensity of the white Dane's gaze.

Skallagrim joined Hakon just then, and she found herself pulled farther along the network of streets. As they entered a side lane, she braved one last look back. Instantly she spied the towering Dane as he left the walk to join two women.

Ailinn's ire flared. The man possessed a female for each arm, yet his base cravings drove him to acquire another?

The image of the tall Dane and the women continued to nip at her, vex her. Their elegant dress suggested they be wives of status. Certainly not slaves. The Norse were polygamous devils, she had once been told. They enjoyed as many wives as they could maintain and kept even more female slaves beneath their roofs. Yet, 'twas appalling that the man should openly seek her purchase within his wives' view.

A sudden realization lurched through Ailinn. The women's garments were wholly unlike those of other townswomen she had seen. Rather, the gowns of these women were much like her old nursemaid's, Bergette's, only far richer. Upon their heads they wore the distinctive flowing veil of the Franks—the *couvre chef*.

Ailinn pondered this, mystified, when she was brought to a sudden halt. Looking up, she found herself before a small house, stave-built with vertical planking. The carcass of an entire ox occupied a platform, raised up on posts above the portal, sacrificial offering to the exactions of the Nordic gods.

Ailinn gaped up at the poor beast, aghast at the practice. Before her, the door drew open.

As Ailinn lowered her gaze, the breath sealed in her throat. A brutish-looking woman, thick and raw-boned, filled the entrance, scowling down at her.

The bell of Saint Anskar. Lyting slipped the pouch from his belt and weighed it in his hand as he gazed on the hallowed piece.

After returning Brienne and Aleth to their lodgings, he'd set out about town, restless, knotted up, with a sharp need to stretch himself.

Enwrapped in thought, the cheer sapped from his day, he ranged the full breadth and reach of Hedeby. With a sharp jolt he stayed himself as he quested yet another doorway, another yard, for a glimpse of auburn hair.

The beauty eclipsed his every conscious step—scorn-filled eyes, emblazoning her memory to heart.

Wresting himself from that vision, he set himself to a more purposeful task—locating Anskar's church. His inquiries led him here, eastward, to the harbor end of town.

Beneath the shadow of the earthenworks stood the modest structure that once served the saintly archbishop. A sorry thing that it should serve the populace of Hedeby nowadays as a fish *hus*. He only hoped the owner would be agreeable to parting with its bell and wondered ruefully if 'twas currently employed to signal the arrival of the day's fresh catch.

Lyting hefted the pouch once more in his palm and started forward. An outburst of laughter from the direction of the docks brought him around. Six of the drakken-warriors made their way toward him along the walk.

In their midst strode a bull of a man whom Lyting recognized from earlier that day when he sought to purchase the maid. Broad of feature and build, he bore himself with a decided, self-assured gait. His teeth gapped beneath a passing smile, and braids plaited the iron-gray hair at temple and jaw.

"Ho!" a voice called out from the troop.

Lyting cut a glance over them. Again the voice bellowed in greeting. This time a man stepped apart and waved an arm wide, his features lost beneath a dense growth of beard, its dusky brown shade at odds with his coppery ravel of hair.

Lyting looked about himself to see if someone stood near who might be the object of the man's enthusiasm. But in the next instance the man abandoned his comrades and hastened directly toward him, a wide grin brightening his face.

"Lyting!" The raider grasped his arm in friendship and clapped a hand robustly to his shoulder. "I thought you to be in Francia wielding sword and might for your uncle, the duke."

Lyting swept a gaze over the disturbingly familiar features, then likewise broke into a broad grin.

"Stefnir? I did not recognize you beneath that thatch."

"Been *i viking* the month long." Stefnir rasped the beard with his knuckles. "You will recall how lean the spoils are in the service of our king and how spare the women." He winked a smile. "I set off to fill my coffers and enjoy some wenching this spring."

Remembering his comrades, Stefnir turned and motioned them on.

The grayed warrior buckled his gaze on Lyting as he advanced and the distance narrowed between them. Lyting met the silent measure of those eyes. Muscles lightly reined, he held his stance, absorbing the tremor of boards beneath his feet as they shivered with the men's heavy, booted passage. Without utterance the raiders continued on.

"Your leader?" Lyting nodded after the older man, careful to conceal his interest.

"Skallagrim? He commands the *drakkar Wind Raven*. I joined under his sail. These few . . ." Stefnir gestured to the dragonships anchored within the palisade. "These are but a small portion of a great fleet that voyaged under Harald Split-Brow. We fell upon the Saxons and Irish while they still licked their wounds from the late autumn raid."

Stefnir clamped open hands to the sides of his belted waist in obvious satisfaction. “The main body of *drakken* returns north with Harald. Skallagrim and some of the others had more pressing needs and diverted to Hedeby. But what of you? How fares your father and his new domain?”

A tiny muscle twinged the corner of Lyting’s eye. “He died shortly after my arrival three years past.”

A shaft of surprise widened Stefnir’s eyes, then passed. “Gruel Atli was a fierce and courageous warrior. Though his absence will be sore felt, ‘tis comfort and glory that his sword now sings in the halls of Valhalla.”

Lyting reserved comment as to where, in truth, his father’s spirit might dwell, and whether ‘twas Valkyries or Angels who saw him there. He deemed it best to not decry the old gods too hastily with an espousal of the cross and risk affronting Stefnir. If his old friend indeed served beneath Skallagrim’s command, there was information to be gleaned of the raid on the Celtic Isle and of the beautiful captive who so haunted him.

“My elder brother, Rurik, now holds fief and title and rules as Baron de Valsemé,” he revealed simply.

A smile crept over Stefnir’s lips and trailed up to his eyes. “I imagine that set ill with Hastein.”

“*Já*. That it did.” Lyting shut his mind to his half-brother and all the black, fetid memories. “But his obsessions no longer afflict us.”

Dispelling the shadows with a sound mental shake, Lyting delivered a friendly clout to Stefnir’s arm.

“What say you we find ourselves some skins of wine and joints of meat? I would hear of your adventures across the sea

“And I, the maids of Francia.” Stefnir’s face split wide with a grin

A brief time later Lyting and Stefnir sat before a vendor’s stall over beakers of ale and steaming bowls of venison stew.

“Last year’s raid brought the Irish to their knees,” Stefnir said around a jawful of meat. “This year Harald wished to break their spine.”

Lyting held intent on each word, restraining the questions he would ask while Stefnir quaffed down the contents of his cup and sleeved the wetness from his mouth.

“At first sight of the dragon-prow, these Irish hide their treasures away. Harald came away with few spoils last autumn, though he scented a hoard beneath his feet. They are a clever lot, the Irish, but Harald is shrewder. He took as captives some of their soldiers—Munstermen—and kept them alive long enough to learn the location of their *souterrains*—ancient underground caves.”

Lyting girt his patience as Stefnir attended to the last of his stew and called for more ale. But a moment later Stefnir rewarded his forbearance.

“We swept down upon them like a sky full of hawks—swift, without warning, before the first rift of dawn. Harald marked the monastery and surrounding grounds for himself. The chiefs closest to him blanketed the area as well, claiming all the choice sites. This maddened Skallagrim, that they should seize the church coffers solely for themselves, for those are the far richest to plunder in any Christian land.

“But Skallagrim is an artful fox. He was among those who loosened the Munstermen’s tongues and recalled that one spoke of ‘overkings’ who dwelt upon the Suir. We sailed inland for a time, leading a fair division of the fleet which was likewise displeased by Harald’s wiles. Soon enough we came upon a compound, boasting many buildings, ablaze with torchlight and decorated for feasting. Before the first chink of light punctured the night, we fell on them, undeclared.”

Stefnir stayed his tale while the vendor’s round wife refilled his beaker. She then topped off Lyting’s, which, like his bowl, stood scarcely touched. A frown puckered her brow as she withdrew and padded back to the stall, Stefnir’s eyes following the sway of her hips.

“And how fared the raid?” Impatience scrubbed through Lyting, keen to have a full recounting, yet knowing when he did, he would ill like the taste of it.

“‘Twas not the sort of victory I sought.” Stefnir stirred from his distraction. “Not one a warrior boasts of, or a skald deigns worthy to set to verse. ‘Tis no honor to slay men befogged in their cups.” He took a swill of ale, then cocked a brow at Lyting and smiled afresh.

“ ‘Twould seem the Irish enjoy their drink as much as we. ‘Twas a wedding feast we interrupted, though, in truth, the event had yet to take place. We discovered the bride and her handmaids yet in her bower. Odin did smile on me that I should be among the first to sample that fair, virginal gathering.”

Lyting came forward on the stool, gripping his cup so hard he risked to break it. But Stefmir continued without notice, tossing a hand to the air.

“Whatever be their customs, their men began their celebrations aforehand, making light of our work. I’ll give you this.” He held Lyting’s gaze. “The `overking’—whoever he was—purposed to impress his guests with his importance and power, and displayed a great portion of his wealth in the hall. That, too, eased our task.”

“But what of the bride?” Lyting brought his cup down solidly on the table, sloshing its contents. “What of the maidens trapped in the bridal chamber?”

Stefmir stilled his beaker midair, casting Lyting a curious, heedful look.

“Did one possess dark red hair, the color of an autumn wood afire in its crown? A maiden of rare beauty,” Lyting pressed.

“*Já*,” Stefmir acknowledged slowly, pensively, then pulled on a long draught of ale.

“I sought to purchase such a maid this day, from one of the raiders who drove their fettered captives through streets. He appeared to know your chieftain, Skallagrim.”

Stefmir spewed his mouthful of ale, missing Lyting and the table, but sprayed a cat that dozed nearby. He then sat choking a full minute, pounding his chest while the feline shook itself indignantly and swished away, tail flicking high in the air.

“*You?*” Stefmir uttered in astonishment. Slapping his thigh, he threw back his head and bellowed with laughter. “ ‘Twas *you* who sought to purchase Skallagrim’s prize slave, while the rest of us were near deprived of our vitals for merely looking upon her overlong?”

He wiped the tears from his eyes. “I heard the tale that someone, not of the fleet, sought to possess her. You are fortunate to still carry something of use between your legs. Curse that I should be restricted aboard the *Wind Raven* with watch at the time and missed the sport. Tell me in truth. Did you lock horns with Hakon over the doe?”

“Hakon.” Lyting tested the name and found it to resonate unpleasantly with that of his dead half-brother. Ill portent or coincidence? he wondered, then tucked the thought to memory. “What is his tie to Skallagrim? And what of the maid?”

Stefmir rose, a smile stretching his beard. “My friend, you have set your desires upon the bride, herself. And should you be intent on that quest, you will need to defy both a dragon and a demon. But, come. Let us walk atime, and I will tell you what I know.”

After pitching a small coin to the vendor’s wife, they proceeded along the rivulet, westward through town.

“Skallagrim and Hakon quarreled bitterly over the girl. Hakon gained the chamber before the rest and, if believed, seized her first. When I entered, Skallagrim had her in his grasp. From their argument I garner she slipped from Hakon’s hold only to be snared by Skallagrim. In the end Hakon yielded. Skallagrim not only commands the crew of the *Wind Raven*, he is Hakon’s uncle.”

Lyting lifted a brow at this. “Hakon said Skallagrim intends to use the maid to some end.”

“Ah, the pity of it, too.” Stefmir sighed. “We capture a nymph of such marvelous beauty that she stirs a man’s most lust-filled dreams but to gaze on her. Yet, we are forbidden to sample that sweet nectar. Would you believe, Skallagrim preserves her virtue to gift her to another, not even a Norseman?”

Lyting halted in his footsteps. “Skallagrim does not pleasure himself upon her?” he said in amazement. “She remains unravished? A virgin?”

“Skallagrim assumes so. He could not verify that detail with his crew so eager to aid him. Her attendants proved virgins, and the preparations within the compound were so elaborate ‘twas probably to be her first joining.”

Lyting rubbed a hand across his jaw, envisioning the Irish maid—the delicate contours of her face; the slim, straight nose; the full, enticing mouth. He blinked away the image and picked up his pace once more.

“ ‘Tis singularly odd that Skallagrim did not have her himself. Is the man a eunuch?”

Stefnir laughed. “*Nei*. But mayhap no better fortune. Rumors abound that he was unmanned a few years back. Some say a fever near took him and left him impotent. Others claim he put aside a lover who thereupon revealed herself to be a witch and put him under a curse. When his member stirs, ‘tis said it becomes a great gnarled root, twisting this way and that so he cannot engage in the act or ‘tis too painful.”

Stefnir shrugged. “Wherever lies the truth, there is one thing for certain. Skallagrim does not take his women openly on raids as do the others. At times he keeps a woman in his tent. Let us hope he enjoys some success. ‘Tis a wretched thing to befall a man.”

Lyting nodded absently, his thoughts running far ahead. “What need has Skallagrim of a virgin if he cannot make use of her himself?”

“Silk. He means to use her to gain concessions in Byzantium’s silk trade.”

For a second time Lyting stopped abruptly midstep and rounded on his old comrade.

“Upon Odin’s beard, ‘tis truth,” Stefnir swore. “I sat about the fires with Skallagrim one night while he was in one of his more agreeable moods and drink had eased his tongue. He claimed she is more valuable to him than gold. But only if he can deliver her to the East undefiled.”

Stefnir gestured that they divert along a side lane. Lyting easily matched pace, though his mind was set to spinning.

“Like myself,” Stefnir continued, “Skallagrim voyaged on this raid for quick plunder—to enrich himself as he might before setting sail for Miklagård, the ‘Great City’ of Byzantium—Constantinople. As he tells it, he hunts Arctic furs in the winter months and trades in Byzantium during the summer. His sister, Thora, maintains a *hus* here in Hedeby. ‘Tis his anchorage, so to speak.” Stefnir directed Lyting right on a northward walk.

“It might surprise you, but Skallagrim is a man of farsightedness. For years he has courted Byzantium’s officials and labored to see the silk trade opened to Western markets. The Byzantines impose many restrictions and tariffs and allow precious little of the stuff to pass out of their walled city. Evidently, Skallagrim neared an arrangement last summer. He woos a high court official, a thoroughly—and advantageously—corrupt man who holds sway with the minister of trade.”

Stefnir glanced to Lyting and lifted a meaningful brow. “This official possesses a reputation for generosity to those he befriends. And those who gift him well. Among other diversions, the man collects beautiful concubines from all over the Empire and beyond. But he accepts only virgins, not wanting to acquire them disease-ridden and possibly pregnant. ‘Tis my belief he harbors some personal fetish to be the first to broach those fair portals himself.” Stefnir snorted.

Lyting envisaged the beauty trapped within the Byzantine’s exotic web as he employed his methods to break and subdue her. Bile rose in Lyting’s throat.

“Anyway—” Stefnir continued—“when Skallagrim ensnared the Irish beauty, arrayed in her bridal raiment, he saw her usefulness and felt he had gained better spoils than even Harald Split-Brow in the end. He intends to sail with her at week’s end for Byzantium.”

Lyting’s thoughts churned with his rising emotions as Stefnir came to a halt. Looking up, Lyting realized they stood before the slave *hus*.

“Mere talk of this woman doth whet my appetite,” Stefnir declared. “What say you we entertain ourselves with a few Irish wenches?”

Lyting suddenly felt as though he observed his old friend from a great distance. He recognized that, had Skallagrim openly shared his captive, she would find no rest to her days for the ceaseless demands of men like Stefnir.

“*Nei*.” He concealed his disgust. “There are matters I need attend to for now.”

“Mayhap we can enjoy a bladder of wine before I leave to rejoin the king’s fleet,” Stefnir called cheerfully as he started for the portal. “You have yet to tell me of the maids of Francia.”

Pausing, he put one hand to the door’s framework and glanced back. “One caution, friend. Should you harbor thoughts to gain the maid, watch Hakon. I believe he means to have her, regardless of his uncle’s plans.”

Lyting nodded gravely, then took his leave. As earlier, he walked for a time, his thoughts chasing round and round as he wrestled with what he deemed a most unreasonable urge to protect the maid. He reminded himself that she belonged to Skallagrim. Reminded himself that he purposed to set his path for Corbie upon his return to Normandy.

He remained unappeased, a storm of unrest gathering in his soul.

Was it God's design or Devil's temptation that his path should cross with this woman's? Soul and flesh, ever the struggle. Deep within, he sensed 'twould be an age before he regained his heart's peace.

Climbing to the top of the earthenworks, he surprised the watchman. After an exchange of greetings, he remained and faced seaward, tracing the ribbon of the Schlei to where it disappeared into the distance.

Thoughtfully he scanned the masts of the *drakken* moored in the harbor.

Turning slowly around, Lyting drifted his gaze over the crowded rooftops of Hedeby. Somewhere beneath their thatched crowns dwelled the maid of his enchantment.



Ailinn thrashed within the grip of the two Norsewomen as they strove to force her onto her back upon one of the room's two raised side-floors.

'Twas only a matter of moments before they would fell her to their purposes, Ailinn knew. There was no escape. Only brief victory, vanished in a blink-of-eye. The sow she'd first encountered before the portal now grabbed at her ankles, intent on snatching her from her feet. But they would not have her so easily. They would taste her mettle and know the fires that forge the Irish.

Ailinn twisted and kicked free of the sow, her feet slapping down atop the platform. The other two women stepped up, onto the planking, dragging her with them.

A dark blade of fear rode Ailinn as she strained against them. Did they aim to harm her? Prepare her for some grim Nordic ritual? Sacrifice her to the gods? Her thoughts strayed to the poor ox outside the door.

Summoning her strength, Ailinn threw her weight to one side, propelling herself and her unwanted companions off balance. As one, they crashed into the loom that stood braced at the end of the flooring. The piece tottered, one of its uprights dropping off the edge of the settle, then keeled sideways and clattered to the floor.

Ailinn grimaced as the Norsewomen wrenched her arms, one seizing a fistful of her hair and jerking her head backward.

The sow stumped forward, drawing back her hand, wide and open-palmed. Ailinn braced herself for the blow. Just as the hand began to fall, Skallagrim roared from his chair.

Thora. The sow had a name. Ailinn gasped for breath. Like Hakon, the woman yielded to the chieftain's will.

Slowly Skallagrim rose to his feet, pegging Ailinn with his eyes. He started forward with purposeful steps.

The women eased their hold a fraction, then slammed Ailinn flat against the wall where the loom had been and held her there. Ailinn stifled her cry as pain fractured the back of her head and splintered down her spine.

Skallagrim's shadow fell across her. For a moment he stood, breathing down upon her. For all her worth, Ailinn could not still the tremors in her legs.

A wave of terror crested through her as Skallagrim unsheathed the knife at his waist. Firelight glinted along its honed edge as he brought the steel within view. Turning the blade, he pressed its cold shaft against her throat,

Ailinn swallowed beneath the thirsting metal as his meaty fist moved to the top of her gown. With a swift, stout yank he ripped the fabric from her breasts. Ailinn squeezed her eyes shut, the tear of cloth filling her ears as he stripped away its full length.

Cool air rushed over her bared flesh. She sought to distance herself, mind and soul, from her vile plight, but Skallagrim jolted her back. Dropping the shorn gown in a heap at her feet, he seized upon the

remnants yet trapped at her back. They joined the rest in a puddle as he pulled her from the wall and lowered the blade to rest between her breasts.

Fear stalked through Ailinn. She forced her eyes to meet his, craving to slice him through with her contempt, yet knowing she did no more than amuse him for she could not win past her panic.

Skallagrim regarded her stolidly, his eyes unstirred in their depths. Closing his hand over hers, he isolated one finger and applied precise and calculated pressure to the joint.

Pain shot through Ailinn's hand and traveled along her arm. Her knees doubled beneath her, and she dropped to the flooring.

Instantly the women pushed her onto her back and held her by neck, arms, and shoulders. The sow, Thora, forced her legs apart and held them as Skallagrim knelt before her. Ailinn stiffened as hands touched her. She steeled herself for the coming pain, then sickened before the promise of a torturous death. She was a weak-kneed creature after all, she decided, closing her eyes. May Saint Pádraig and the Heavenly Host conduct her swiftly to her reward.

No pain followed. Only the grunt of the sow. Ailinn peered through her lashes. The woman nodded her affirmation at something while Skallagrim likewise indicated his approval. At that they released her legs, and she found herself hauled upright and set to her feet.

Ailinn stood before Skallagrim, her cheeks burning hot. She sought to cover herself with her hands, neither shred of cloth nor scrap of modesty left to her. He roamed an eye over her, smiling within his beard. Once more he growled his approval, then moved apart. Taking a small caldron from over the fires, he added its contents to an oaken tub that stood toward the opposite end of the room.

Incredulous, Ailinn allowed herself to be led forward without further struggle and watched as Thora sprinkled petals and herbs over the inviting waters. They meant to bathe her!

Rapidly she pieced together bits and fragments of the past days. Skallagrim did not appear intent on ravishing her himself and withheld her from his men. Nor would he allow the woman, Thora, to strike her. But why? She was but a slave now. Was there some reason he did not wish her marred?

And what of their crude examination of her? Her cheeks flamed anew. Did they inspect the proof of her maidenhood? Praise God that she was yet chaste. What would have befallen her had the evidence no longer been intact? What would befall her now that it was?

One of the blond giants prodded her from behind and gestured that she step into the tub. Ailinn complied, knowing herself to be in dire need of a thorough scrubbing.

The next moment she reconsidered, wincing at the heat of the water. Immediately the women surrounded her. Scooping up handfuls of soft soap from bowls, they lathered her from head to toe, none too gently, then doused her with bucketfuls of clean water and repeated the process.

Ailinn spluttered beneath the second downpour. Parting the sopping hair from her face, she discovered Hakon leaning against the open door. Before she could cross her hands over her breasts, an expanse of cloth snapped open in front of her, blocking the view. Ailinn looked up to find Skallagrim outstretching a great square of linen. He did not trust Hakon, either, she decided as she rose on shaky legs and stepped into the folds.

Skallagrim left her to the women's ministrations as he proceeded to the portal and set Hakon to some task outside the building. While Skallagrim yet turned from them, the two Norse "guardswomen" dried Ailinn roughly, whispering and tittering among themselves as they yanked her hair and pinched her flesh.

Skallagrim caught the last of this and drove them from the house at full bellow. He then harangued Thora at length, pointing to Ailinn, then to the door, and at times, the rafters and floor. Ailinn understood none of it yet dared not move. She stood clutching the linen about her till Skallagrim ceased his rantings and, at last, motioned that she wait upon the settle.

Thora notched her chin, her ire fermenting as she crossed to the back of the room. Withdrawing a shapeless tunic from a chest that stood there, she returned and thrust it in Ailinn's face.

Fish eyes, Ailinn thought as she slipped the garment over her head beneath Thora's cold and glassy stare. But when the cloth's harsh texture sent a rash up her throat and provoked her to scratching, Skallagrim ordered her remove it and set to searching through his own sea chest.

Ailinn's heart strained as he brought forth objects that once graced Mór's hall. Finding a garment, he withdrew it and bore it to her, a soft-green gown—her steppaunt's, Murieann's. A fresh shaft of pain pierced Ailinn's heart and continued on to her soul.

Tears welled as she drew on the gown. Murieann was slight in build like her youngest daughter, Lia, though Deira stood taller. *Was*. Ailinn shivered as she tugged down the fabric and fretted anew for her stepcousins. The hems fell far short of ankle and wrist.

Skallagrim returned to the sea chest and brought forth an elegant cordage, a braided piece of varied colors and fine needlework, meant to cincture a dress. This, too, she recognized as Murieann's. As he started toward her, Thora caught at his sleeve, desiring the girdle for herself. But Skallagrim shrugged her off with a growl and bore the piece to Ailinn. When he turned around, Thora stood over his sea chest, unfolding the bridal mantle.

Ailinn clutched the girdle to her breast as Skallagrim howled at Thora and tromped back across the room. But Thora found her voice and matched him for volume. Like a badger with its catch, she clung to the elegant cloak and would not let it go.

On they bickered while, soundlessly, Hakon entered the house and took up a place on the settle opposite Ailinn. Half-reclining, he listened amusedly to the squabble while he drifted his gaze over Ailinn. She trembled beneath his hungry perusal as he grazed the curves beneath her gown and lingered over her bare legs.

Ailinn diverted her attention back to the warring couple and to the bridal mantle. Rhiannon's mantle.

What if Rhiannon had been right? The thought nettled. What if the Norsemen believed her to be a valuable hostage of royal lineage? And what would become of her when they discovered that she was only a poor relation of a vanquished tribe—Ailinn of the Érainn?

Still, 'twas like fitting together shards of broken pottery. 'Twas hard to match the edges. Pieces were lacking and she could scarce make sense of those she held. If the heathens thought to gain ransom, why then their concern that she be a virgin? An unravished bride would be worth more than one spoiled, true. Yet, her instincts told her more lay behind Skallagrim's interest in her virtue.

Ailinn massaged her forehead. She understood little of men's dealings, their barterings for power and wealth . . . and hostages. Rhiannon understood. 'Twas why she first cast her net for Domnal of the Raithlind Eóganachts, certain that he would be next to rule from the Rock of Cashel. 'Twas why they exchanged places that fateful morn . . .

Her thoughts spiraled back to that grim morning, only 'twas not grim at its outset, but rather a day of high cheer and merriment—Rhiannon's wedding day.

Ailinn, Deira, and Lia, and all the other maids who attended the bride awoke before dawn, restless in their sleep, having captured fair little of it.

They rose, giddy for the day to come when Mór would make the traditional "bridal ride" with Rhiannon, and Domnal would appear with the Raithlind and abduct her. Afterward, all would return to the compound to fulfill the ceremonies and feast away the remainder of the day and night.

Lia had laughed so gaily, Ailinn recalled, and proposed they slip out of the compound to roll in the morning dew for good luck. Good luck, Ailinn thought bitterly. Before they could even dress fully, they heard the clash in the courtyard.

"Bran!" Rhiannon screamed. "The Dalcassian! He has come to seize me. He vowed as much."

Rhiannon wrung her hands, eyes darting from wall to wall as though she looked for a weapon to seize upon. Then a thought sparked to life in her eyes.

"Help me, Cousin," Rhiannon pleaded, gripping Ailinn. "Bran must not find me. His manhood was sore offended when I chose Domnal over him and rejected his offer of marriage. But he does not seek me this day to soothe his bruised pride alone. 'Tis insult he issues—and challenge—to Raithlind and Caisil and all Eóganachts alike."

Ailinn tried to pull from Rhiannon's hold, heedful of her blurring of falsehoods and truths, and wary of her reference to herself as *cousin*—a relationship Rhiannon loathed to acknowledge unless she have desperate need of Ailinn for some self-serving end.

“Bran knows that, in time to come, Domnal will claim the throne of Cashel,” Rhiannon continued, undeterred. “Long have the kings of Munster sprung from our line, and Domnal is favored to succeed. The Dalcassian views him as Domnal’s foremost rival, for he covets the crown himself.”

The din mounted in the hall.

Ailinn winced as Rhiannon’s nails stabbed into her.

“Bran must not succeed. ‘Tis *me* he wants, to strike at Domnal. *Please*, Ailinn,” Rhiannon’s voice rose with urgency. “Take my gown, my mantle. He does not know my face. Let him think you are me, and go with him. When he discovers his error, ‘twill be too late. I shall get word to Domnal at once, I promise. He camps nearby awaiting the bridal ride.”

Steel rang on steel without.

Alarm filled Rhiannon’s eyes. “Quickly, Ailinn. ‘Twill be strife for all Munster and a warring of tribes should Bran succeed and spoil Domnal’s bride.”

Ailinn snatched free of Rhiannon’s grip, her temper flaring. “Yet you would see him spoil me? ‘Twas your own sharp tongue that brings Bran down on us now, not challenge to Domnal, and well you know it. Far more than male pride and injured manhood drives Bran. Rather, ‘tis the grave insults you hurled at his people when he offered for your hand. Still, you would preserve yourself at my ruin that you might sit in queenly splendor at Cashel.”

“What?” Rhiannon shrieked. “Would you have seen me accept Bran to my marriage bed? Taint the blood of the Caisil with that of a baseborn Dalcassian forevermore?”

“Baseborn, Rhiannon? Bran is a Dalcassian prince.”

“There is but one kind of Dalcassian,” Rhiannon sneered. “Swine, not fit to tend me in my chambers.”

Ailinn took a swift step forward, causing Rhiannon to fall back a pace.

“And ‘twas the very fullness of those sentiments that so inflamed Bran and now brings him beating down upon our door. Do not deny it. I was present when you vented your spleen to the Dalcassian envoy and rejected their prince’s proposal. Did you think Bran would countenance such insult and swallow it meekly? Now we all suffer the blight of your words. I bear no wish to hazard defilement because of them.”

“But you need to help me.” Rhiannon clutched at Ailinn.

“I shall take your place, Rhiannon,” Deira offered quietly and came forth to stand before them.

Rhiannon whirled around, eyes flashing. Though three years younger, Deira nearly matched her for height. “Mayhap so!” Her voice filled with renewed hope.

“*Ni hea*, Deira,” Ailinn protested, her stomach clenching at the thought.

“‘Tis all right, Ailinn,” Deira comforted. “Domnal will come for me. But Rhiannon is right. The Dalcassian must not seize her, or so much more bloodshed will follow. ‘Tis best for all that I go with Bran. He’ll not harm me once he realizes his mistake.”

Ailinn held no such confidence. As ever, Deira placed others before herself. But this time, overtrustful and uncomprehending of the full of the situation, she put herself at risk. That, Ailinn could not abide, though Rhiannon appeared eager for her to do so.

Ailinn looked on while Rhiannon set out her jewels and spread her wedding gown. White. It struck Ailinn as singularly odd that, where most brides chose bright-colored gowns, Rhiannon should insist upon white as though to attest to her purity. Ailinn held her own opinions on that matter. Mayhap, what Rhiannon truly feared was what Bran would discover of her. Or how he might use that knowledge.

Bran. What had she heard of him? A brave and fierce warrior? Prudent and fair? She had seen him once, a solid-built man with fiery curls covering head and chin, favorable enough to look upon. Should she go with him, feigning to be the bride, ‘twas likely he’d be angry when he discovered the ruse. But should he decide to keep her . . .

Ailinn watched Rhiannon unfold the shimmering bridal mantle, a heavy brocade of white woven with emerald green and shot through with threads of gold.

Mayhap, ‘twould not be so terrible a thing, she pondered. In the next moon’s turning she would be eighteen. At times Ailinn wondered if her uncle ever intended to find her a husband. But though she loved her stepfamily, and Deira and Lia as sisters, she held no true place among the Eóganachts.

‘Twould be with considerable chance, to go with Bran, she deemed. Perchance, he would take her to wife to right his offense—if there be one. Or perchance, he would keep her as his concubine or mistress. ‘Twas allowable under Brehon law, though not a station she desired. Yet, if he spoiled her, she reasoned, ‘twas probable he would keep her at his side in some wise to amend his wrong. She might still find more acceptance among the Dalcassians under Bran’s banner than ever she had among the Eóganachts.

As Ailinn looked to see Deira take the gown from Rhiannon, she realized that naught truly mattered save her stepcousin. She could not allow Deira to risk herself.

“I will take your place, Rhiannon.” Ailinn swept the snowy dress from Deira’s hands with gritty determination.

Shouts heightened on the other side of the door. Blades clashed and scraped.

Hurriedly Ailinn slipped into the gown. A flurry of hands attended her, the maids white-faced for all they heard. The rich mantle weighed heavily upon her shoulders as the attendants secured it in place with gleaming silver brooches.

Rhiannon directed that Ailinn’s auburn tresses be drawn back and hidden beneath the cloud of veil, lest Bran know her own to be raven. Lia quickly fashioned a crown of wild hyacinth from sprigs waiting in the crocks and set it upon Ailinn’s head.

“*Non. Non. Ma chere, Ailinn,*” Bergette implored, breaking her silence. “ ‘Tis evil, I feel in my bones. You must not go with him.”

Ailinn looked on her Frankish nursemaid, surprised she had forgotten her till now. Before she could reply, a man screamed out in pain, and she heard his bulk clump against the other side of the door.

Fear rippled through her. This was more than simple abduction. Bran would not strike Mór’s compound and slay the wedding guests to wreak vengeance for Rhiannon’s insults.

A great blow fell upon the door, so hard the boards shuddered. Several more blows followed, accompanied by the cracking and splintering of wood. Bergette rushed forth to place herself between Ailinn and the portal, her arms outstretched in a protective gesture.

Ailinn braced herself, her nails biting into her palms. She prepared to confront the flame-haired Dalcassian, but when the door burst open, ‘twas not Bran who entered in. . . .

Ailinn withdrew from her reverie, her gaze traveling to Hakon. He watched her, fires banked in his eyes.

Fresh pricklings of fear coursed through her. She averted her eyes to find Skallagrim folding the bridal mantle back into the sea chest. Just as Ailinn became aware of the room’s uncommon silence, Thora’s bulk moved before her and blocked her view.

Face dark with anger, Thora yanked the fine cordage of Murieann’s girdle from Ailinn’s grasp. She lumbered back across the room with the prize, then on a sudden, inspired thought, retrieved a leather strap from the side floor and flung it at Ailinn’s feet.

Ailinn recovered the strip, realizing Thora intended she should belt her gown with the piece, then recognized the strap to be the tether that had bound her wrists.

Mayhap, ‘twas a more fitting girdle, she reasoned with a twinge of despair. She was a slave now. A slave with an uncertain future. But, then, what future was ever certain?

The hours dragged slowly as the day aged to evening. Skallagrim saw that Thora set Ailinn no task too strenuous or that might cause her injury. Thora took unkindly to his interference but, in the end, busied Ailinn with simple chores—setting the loom to rights, twisting thread, tending the hearth fires, and replenishing the men’s cups.

Ailinn felt Hakon’s burning gaze trace her every movement. She grew uncomfortable beneath his interests and breathed relief when at last he departed.

Meanwhile, Skallagrim sat in his carved chair without remark as he shaped a portion of bone into a gaming piece. ‘Twas not until he rose that Ailinn spied the battle-ax resting against the chair’s side.

Skallagrim moved to the end of the room, where a frame bed sat upon the elevated flooring. When he beckoned she join him, Ailinn’s heart rose to her throat.

Warily she crossed the hall. But as she reached the platform, Skallagrim tossed several fur robes to the floor, then bid her step up onto the planking. Slipping an iron ring about her ankle, he chained her to the foot of his bed.

Long afterward, Ailinn lay awake in the dark while Thora snored softly upon her pallet and Skallagrim rattled out long, deep breaths. Embers glowed red within the hearth, partially illuminating the room.

Ailinn fixed her gaze upon the gable end of the hall, to the triangular opening just beneath the slope of the roof. There she could view a sprinkling of stars.

In all Creation, did God know she was here? Did He heed her prayers or abandon her among the pagans?

Her thoughts went to Thora. The Norsewoman would subject her to every hardship, if allowed, deeming her no more than a common slave to be exploited and abused at will.

Hakon, too, would clearly use—and abuse—her, but in more vile ways. He was a black-hearted heathen, and only Skallagrim stood between him and his desires.

Yet, 'twas the chieftain's own designs that preyed most heavily upon her mind. What bitter fate did he cast for her? What faceless destiny waited on the morrow?

Inexplicably her thoughts turned to the white-haired Dane, as ever they had this day. She did not regret her insult to him, she told herself, for he was a godless Norseman like the rest. Yet, she could not help but wonder whether her life would have been better had he succeeded in purchasing her and she lay this night beneath his roof.

An accompanying thought startled Ailinn, and she turned into the furs and closed her eyes against the vivid image it formed. Warm currents rushed through her. Still, the vision lingered, bringing heat to her cheeks.

If the man sought to acquire her, then surely he intended that she lay beneath more than his roof.



Lyting drew deeper into the shadows as voices erupted nearby, two noisy revelers fracturing the late-night silence with their song.

Swathed in a great, gray cloak, Lyting tugged the hood downward. Even on a moonless night his bright mane marked him. Tonight the moon hung like a fat crescent in the sky, and he held no wish to be discovered.

He remained in the darkness of the narrow side lane as the merrymakers passed into view—two Danish seamen with a maid between them. Angry shouts discharged from a neighboring *hus*, and someone hurled a bucket from the door of another.

Lyting stepped to the edge of the passage as the trio continued on, then returned his interest across the wooded lane to the *hus* of Thora Kolsdóttir.

It had been a fairly simple matter to locate the *hus*. He had arrived in time to observe Hakon enter the dwelling and to overhear the voices raised within. Presumably, 'twas Skallagrim and Thora who matched volume for volume, though he could discern little of their argument.

He had waited, palm resting on sword hilt, unsure why he had come or what action he might take if a need arose. Soon the *hus* quieted. Still, he waited.

Once, the door opened and a dour-looking woman stepped forth to pitch a bucketful of water into the yard. 'Twas then that he glimpsed the maid's slender figure as she moved near the portal—garbed in green now, her rich auburn hair spilling past her hips. Heat flashed through him, jolting him by its intensity and taking him by surprise.

Lyting girt himself, even now, against the directness of that response, so immediate, instinctive, elemental—all spurred by the mere sight of the Irish beauty.

Mayhap he should have sought to free another, a small voice pricked from a remote corner of his mind. This one lay beyond his grasp. Yet, had he emptied his coffers and found sufficient coin to deliver every captive borne from Ireland, he knew deep in his soul that he still would be here tonight.

In time Hakon emerged from the *hus* and departed in the direction of the docks. Lyting eased his vigil, resolving to stay a time longer, until he must leave to take up his watch of the *Sea Falcon*. There, at the harbor, he would have a clear view of the *Wind Raven* as well.

Sleep he could not seek before dawn's breaking. But he held certain that when he finally gained his rest, his dreams—like the thoughts that had weighed on him these many long hours—would be inescapably entangled with masses of auburn hair.

Ailinn trailed Thora along the street, clutching a bundle of soiled linens to her hip. Ankle cuffs and chains hampered her steps.

Thora scowled back at Ailinn's lagging pace with mounting impatience. Grasping a handful of hair at the side of Ailinn's head, she forced her on at a quickened pace.

Ailinn boiled as Thora released her a short distance later, her scalp yet screaming its protest. She blinked away the moisture that had sprung to her eyes. The Norsewoman wielded her authority with obvious enjoyment. But Ailinn refused to add one crumb to her pleasure. Whatever Thora wrought upon her, she vowed she would not cry out, nor plead, nor allow one tear to fall. Masking all emotion from her face, she fixed her gaze past Thora's broad back and struggled on beneath her burdens.

Increasingly Ailinn grew aware of the marked interest her passage stirred. Men turned from their tasks to appraise her from beneath arched brows and partially lowered lids, their gazes bold, assessing, edged with a certain hunger. By contrast, the women glared, sharp-eyed and tight-lipped.

Ill caring for the attention she drew, Ailinn shifted her gaze to the weathered boards beneath her feet and proceeded along the course in Thora's shadow.

In short time they reached the harbor. Thora led Ailinn along the wharf to its farthest end. Here, the planking ceased and the shore stretched a fair distance to the palisaded seawall.

Numerous tents occupied a large, open tract of land that lay between the edge of water and the border of town. Ships, likewise, populated the expanse, having been grounded ashore. The largest vessels remained moored at pilings mid-harbor or tied at the piers. Ailinn sighted Skallagrim's dragonship, its monster head grinning. Her stomach twisted into a hard, icy knot.

Gruffly Thora directed that she kneel with her bundle upon a little projection that jutted off the quay. Handing Ailinn a paddle board and small, wooden tub filled with soap, Thora motioned that she commence with the washing. Thora then stepped several paces away to join a clutch of townswomen gathered there. Proudly she lifted aside the bright panel of cloth that covered the front of her chemise and displayed Murieann's girdle.

Ailinn simmered as she thrust a tunic into the water and swished it about. She derived a small measure of perverse satisfaction seeing that the cord barely met about Thora's thick waist. It had hung at length on Murieann's slender form.

Ailinn turned back to her task, chiding herself for such an unchristian and mean-spirited thought. Yet, 'twas not the thought itself that disturbed her so much as her pleasuring in it. In truth, she felt no charity toward the Norsewoman, nor any of her kind. Only a rocky barrenness of heart.

Overhead, gulls cried out against the clear-blue vault of sky as they stretched their wings to the warmth of the sun. Along the wharf seamen mended nets and loaded waiting craft while merchants bartered their goods.

Ailinn scrubbed a stubborn spot, then doused the linen once more and sat back on her heels. Brushing away a wisp of hair from her eyes, she squinted against the brightness of the day and envied the birds their freedom.

Joyous squeals of children erupted nearby, drawing Ailinn's eye. She caught a vivid patch of color as it swept up into the air—a small boy in naught but a red tunic, being hoisted high above a man's head. The sprite's waggling legs and squirming bulk obstructed her view of the man. The child laughed gleefully and tossed back his dark headful of curls as his captor apparently nuzzled his stomach.

The man began to lower the child and Ailinn next found herself gazing fully upon the white-haired Dane. In a heartbeat his crystal blue eyes met with hers, but not before she realized that he stood in the shallows before her stripped bare to his loincloth.

Ailinn gasped, letting go the linen from her fingers. Quickly she tore away her gaze and snatched the garment back up from the water. She felt shivery and breathless and jolted to her very core.

Ailinn scrubbed at the tunic vigorously, heat flaming her cheeks. The vision of sculpted muscles, broad shoulders, and hard, sinewed legs continued to burn in her mind's eye.

Several minutes passed before she found the courage to look toward him again. To her relief, he was absorbed in play with the child—children—she corrected as she discovered a second little boy, clad in blue, identical to the first.

The Dane caught the babe up beneath the arms. Stepping deeper into the water, he swung the child round in a wide circle, lifting and dipping the boy in one continuous, wavelike motion.

Ailinn watched, momentarily transfixed by the warm, familial scene playing out before her. It stunned her to see this caring side of a Norseman. At the same time she found herself wholly affected by the sheer magnificence of the man.

He moved with power and grace—beautiful, potent, thrilling to behold. The word *leonine* again sprang to mind, as it had yesterday, when her eyes first encountered him. The long lines of his body appeared supple, resilient, yet well defined. Their underlying strength had been forged, she imagined, through years of discipline and rigorous training.

Ailinn gazed on the rich play of muscle through his chest and arms, then drifted her eyes to his handsome features. She noted the ease of his smile and the unmistakable affection contained in his eyes as he looked on the babe and lifted him heavenward.

Ailinn returned her attention to the garment in her hands and began to beat it with the small paddle. *His?* she wondered of the children, noting they bore him little resemblance, what with their ebony locks and what appeared to be thumb-size impressions in their little chins. He had none, though she thought to have glimpsed dimples in his cheeks.

She whisked a glance to the Dane and back again. Aye, dimples. Creases, really. Deep ones. In each cheek.

Ailinn reversed the cloth and pounded it soundly.

And his eyes . . . she summoned them to mind. His eyes were as blue as the lakes of Killarney, though lighter—brilliant and clear. The children's were indiscernible at this distance, obviously not the same sparkling shade.

Ailinn rubbed soap into a stain, then stayed her busy hands, startled that anything about the Dane should be of concern to her. She turned the cloth over and took up the paddle again.

Of course the man would have children, she reasoned with herself. Likely he had sired more than these two.

Ailinn stole a sideways glance of his splendid frame. Many more. Indeed, what woman would turn him from her bed?

She plunged the garment into the water and sloshed it around. Withdrawing it, she wrung it hard, then slapped it down on the growing pile of sodden cloths.

As Ailinn reached for another linen, she felt the heat of his eyes upon her. Imagination, she chided herself and dismissed the unsettling feeling. Still, the sensation remained.

Slowly she lifted her gaze and immediately lost herself in a crystal blue sea. Ailinn took a long, difficult swallow, her mouth and throat suddenly gone dry. Several moments passed, an eternity, before she could pull away from his intense regard.

She lowered her eyes—a mistake—for they came to rest upon his flat, tapering waist. Then the narrow strip of cloth fastened low about his hips. Then his long, hard, marvelously sculpted legs.

Ailinn's heart began to thud high in her chest and sound in her ears.

The vibrations of the wharf-planking alerted her to Thora's approach. A moment later the Norsewoman barked out some displeasure and gave a jarring shove to her back. Ailinn nearly pitched from the landing, inadvertently toppling a small mound of Thora's chemises into the water.

Pain seared her scalp as Thora dragged her upright by the hair. Ailinn saw the Dane start forward, thunder in his face. But at the same time she glimpsed Thora's hand in her edge of vision, drawing back to strike.

“*Skallagrim!*” Ailinn hurled the name as though it were a weapon.

Thora stayed her hand midair and growled beneath her breath. Releasing Ailinn, she stepped back, lips thinned and nostrils flared. She then jabbed a finger toward the fallen clothes, carping in shrill tones until Ailinn retrieved them from the water.

Satisfied, Thora straightened, smoothed the panels of cloth that overlay the front and back of her gown, then, after casting a glance to the white-haired Dane, returned to her friends.



Anger exploded through Lyting. He started forward as the bearish-looking woman descended upon the maid. Thora Kolsdóttir. He recognized her from yestereve and gained an instant dislike for the woman. In the next moment he halted as the maid called out something and Thora’s arm went rigid. The woman looked ready to chew iron rivets, but she released her hold on the girl.

Lyting rubbed his hand along his jaw. What could the maid have spoken? He watched her pluck the fallen garments from the river. A smile touched his lips and then died as he discovered Thora’s eyes upon him. Incredibly, she tried to draw his interest as she strutted toward the cluster of women, giving a slight pitch to her great hips. In truth, the movement produced more joggle than sway. Meanwhile, her companions whispered and tittered among themselves as their eyes strayed over him.

Lyting felt nauseated. Then his anger boiled afresh. How long had these women been observing him? Had they seen how his gaze fairly consumed the maid? How their eyes had met and wed for that one brief moment? Jealous shrews. Was *that* the cause of this scene? Did they punish the maid on his account?

His choler rose another degree as the women continued to devour him with covetous eyes. If ‘twas a closer look they desired, then they would have it, along with a blistering piece of his mind.

He began to take a forward step, but the children chose that very moment to wrap themselves about his legs.

“Look, Uncle. Ketil.” Richard waved toward the wharf.

“Ketil,” chimed Kylan.

Lyting reined his impulses, remembering the lads. He hauled his eyes from the women and sliced a glance along the pier. There, he spied Ketil examining a length of line. Nearby stood Skallagrim—watching, solemn-faced.

Lyting stilled as he and the chieftain regarded each other across the distance. Skallagrim raised his bearded chin, then shifted his gaze to the maid and then to his sister, Thora.

“Up, Uncle.” Kylan pulled at Lyting’s thigh and hip in an attempt to scramble upward. Richard likewise began to scale his uncle’s other leg.

Stifling the fire that yet burned within, Lyting looked down on the round little heads and allowed his smile to return. He tousled their ebony locks, then lifted them, one to each hip.

Again, the boys called out and waved at Ketil until they captured his attention. Ketil’s teeth gleamed through his blaze of beard, and he lifted his hand in acknowledgment.

Lyting nodded a greeting to Ketil as well, his arms occupied with the two lively pups. Still distracted, he deflected his gaze back toward the maiden.

‘Twould seem that Skallagrim watched over his prize captive as closely as he, himself, did. Likely, the chieftain was not the sort of man who would welcome interference with that which he held as his own—slave *or* sister.

Lyting stabbed a look at the women, yet debating whether or not to confront them with his displeasure. A muscle flexed along his jaw. Teeth clamped tight, he vented a breath. For the moment he would resist the temptation—as long as they left the maid undisturbed.

He glanced once more to the auburn-haired beauty, resolving to remain here for the time, near at hand, and enjoy sporting with young Richard and Kylan.

As his humor flowed slowly back, Lyting sank down into the coolness of the water, drawing the boys with him. Their gasps quickly dissolved to laughter as he squiggled his fingers over their soft bellies and flashed them an openhearted smile.



Ketil watched with gladsome approval at the cheery little scene. 'Twas good to see Lyting relaxing with the mites. He loved children and should have a hall filled with his own. But with his mind set on shutting himself within the sterile walls of Corbie, Rurik and Brienne's children would be the only ones Lyting would ever enjoy.

A shame, Ketil sighed as he examined the line of seal-hide for imperfections and tested its strength. The Good Lord saved Lyting from the brink of death, well and true. But that did not necessarily mean that He spared him a purpose for Corbie. Lyting thought in that vein, however, and it seemed naught could dissuade him.

Ketil chuckled at Richard's antics and waved again. He caught the twinkle in Lyting's eye as he scooped up the boy and dangled him upside down.

"You sailed with that man?" a roughened voice sounded off to his left.

Ketil turned and took measure of the weathered sea-warrior who stood several arm's lengths away. He possessed as brambly a mane of hair and beard as himself and stood nearly as tall.

"*Já,*" Ketil answered with a shadow of caution. "We arrived yestermorn from Normandy."

The man seemed to consider this for a moment, then his eye ranged to Lyting. "Your friend tried to buy a slave of mine." He nodded toward a maid who labored over her wash at the end of the wharf. A maid of exceptional beauty.

Ketil lifted a brow in utter surprise. He had heard of the incident from Aleth and Brienne. But they made no mention that the maid Lyting sought to free was one so fair.

Ketil tugged at his beard, a smile spreading beneath the fiery thicket. 'Twas a good sign. Mayhap, his badgerings and advisements would bear fruit after all.

Ketil smoothed his mustache and shrugged casually. "I imagine that one draws many an eye."

"*Já,* that she does. But your friend seemed more intent than most." The man looked again to Lyting and considered him with a hard stare. "Normandy, eh? Has your pale-haired friend a name?"

Ketil bent an eye over the sea-warrior, gauging how he should respond. "Lyting Atlison, blood-nephew to Duke Rollo himself and brother to the Baron de Valsemé. We sail under the baron's banner. And you?"

The man rolled an eye to Ketil. "Skallagrim, master of the *Wind Raven*. I sail under my own banner." Unexpectedly one side of his mouth drew into the semblance of a smile, then faded. His attention returned to Lyting.

"Best advise Atlison to take a long, cold swim. His desire for my slave is obvious, but the maid is not for purchase. He'll have to find another to bed."

"Him?" Ketil fairly choked, though the thought of Lyting "in lust" was wondrously heartening.

Again, a faint knell of caution sounded somewhere in Ketil's brain, and he felt a compelling need to put Skallagrim's concerns to rest. He hoped Lyting would understand the necessity to depict matters as he must to their Odin-worshipping kinsman.

"*Nei,* there be naught to glean in his interest," Ketil avowed. "Those Franks have turned him into a knee-bending Christian. He seeks a monkish life on our return to Normandy. 'Twas not for himself but for the baronne that he sought to acquire the maid. She is a softhearted woman, a Frank."

Skallagrim looked to Ketil skeptically. "Odd that she would choose a slave of such beauty to tempt her husband."

Ketil huffed into his beard. Obviously Skallagrim had not seen the Lady Brienne nor heard the saga of hers and Rurik's joining. Their tale of love was the sort skalds remembered in verse and celebrated in the halls.

"*Nei.* I did not mean that the baronne selected the maid. She left the matter of purchase to Lyting. He is after all, a full-blooded son of Denmark. Understandably, he chose the most beautiful."

To Ketil's surprise, Skallagrim cracked a smile.

"I imagine the baron would have been appreciative of that, had he succeeded!"

Ketil remained silent as the chieftain cast a suspect eye to Lyting.

“He seeks to be a monk, you say? I have heard that the Christians’ beliefs can unman a warrior. But he does not look unmanned from here.”

“Lyting honors the vows he seeks to embrace, even now,” Ketil maintained staunchly but truthfully. “He suffers as any man who denies his body. He finds his relief as you suggest, by taking frequent swims in cold lakes.”

The tension seemed to seep out of Skallagrim’s shoulders and limbs. His smile reappeared, then mellowed as he shook his head. “ ‘Tis unfathomable, this priest-class’ devotion to celibacy that the Christians so revere.”

Ketil found no response as his thoughts went to Aleth. To his mind, the fairest and most enjoyable achievement of Divine creation was Woman, and *she* God fashioned expressly for Man.

“At least your friend will enjoy the riches of the church without the need to first plunder them!” Skallagrim grinned.

Ketil gave a brief nod and matched his smile as though to agree. He hoped Lyting would move with care about Skallagrim and the beautiful slavegirl. A misstep could prove fateful.



Ailinn rose to her feet, slipping a last glance to the Dane as she took up the dense weight of wet linens. Their eyes brushed for the barest of moments before she turned and followed Thora back along the wharf.

The vision of the bright-haired warrior continued to play in her mind as she and Thora retraced their earlier steps, turning down one lane, then another. Suddenly they came upon a gathering—mostly Arabs and Northmen—crowded about something of interest. In their midst Ailinn spied the maids of Clonmel, displayed before all as common slaves, proffered for a bit of coin. ‘Twas then that her gaze fell on Lia.

“*Ni hea!*” Ailinn lurched forward, her shackles trammeling her step. Their eyes found each other’s just as Thora cuffed Ailinn alongside the back of her head, where marks would be hidden beneath the hair.

Ailinn bent beneath the blow, clutching the sodden laundry to her side. She tasted the sharp, bitter hatred that filled her soul. Hatred for all that was Norse.

Slowly she straightened and cleaved Thora with such a look of vehemence and utter loathing that the Norsewoman drew back a pace.

Ailinn’s eyes then sought Lia’s once more. Their gazes met and held across an ocean of pain in one last farewell.

As she forced her steps on to follow Thora, Ailinn’s heart splinter into a thousand pieces.

Woodenly she trailed Thora’s steps back to the house. As she approached the portal, she observed Hakon within the fenced side yard, his back facing her.

Unclad to the waist, he peered into a small disk of polished metal, nailed to a sapling, and scraped away the growth that covered his jaw. Though Hakon appeared unconcerned with the women’s arrival, Ailinn saw that he watched her in his mirror as she moved toward the door and entered the dwelling.

Thora had no sooner set her to a task than Hakon appeared on the threshold and stepped inside. He paused by the barrel of ale that sat near the entry and took a hollowed gourd from the wall. Ladling up a portion of the golden liquid, he drank it slowly, his eyes passing over her where she knelt by the hearth. Draining the last of the beverage, he returned the dipper to its peg, wiped his mouth, and departed without a word.

Unease settled in Ailinn’s bone. She strove to force Hakon from her mind as she coaxed the embers to life. Thora lingered by the door a moment longer, gazing after Hakon’s back. Her eyes then drew to Ailinn.

Thora moved to a weathered trunk that sat along the wall. Opening it, she withdrew a stout chain, several arms’ lengths in measure, and a heavy lock. Her expression lightened as she started toward Ailinn.

With a grunt, Thora half-bent, half-squatted to remove the linkage that bound Ailinn’s ankles. She then reshackled Ailinn’s left leg with the second, much longer piece of chain. Rising, Thora proceeded to wrap the end about the carved, timbered post opposite the hearth and secure it with the lock.

Ailinn remained motionless as Thora sought her mantle and advanced toward the door. On a parting thought, Thora turned back, grabbed up an abandoned distaff bearing a fluffy knob of wool, and returned to Ailinn long enough to thrust it into her hands. She then snatched up a shallow basket—one Ailinn recognized from yestereve as having held the supper's fish—and quit the house. Thora's voice sounded outside as she presumably informed Hakon of her departure.

The moment drew out. Stillness descended upon the house. Silence.

Ailinn sank beside the hearth, alert, observant, her ears strained for the slightest sound. She fingered the wool, then absently began to twist the fibers to begin a thread as she glanced about the empty hall. Abruptly Ailinn stilled her hands and dropped her gaze. Thora had provided her no spindle. The Norsewoman never intended that she should work the wool.

Just then the room darkened as though the sun had escaped behind the clouds and had been momentarily blotted out. Fine hairs raised along the back of Ailinn's neck. Her gaze drew to the door to behold Hakon framed within its portal.

Ailinn ceased to breathe. Hakon's eyes smoldered deep in their sockets, two burning coals. She prayed he had come for naught but the ale and would quickly slake his thirst and be gone. Her hopes withered as Hakon stepped inside and passed the barrel, sparing it no interest.

He came to a halt. Tunic in hand, he wiped the sweat from his bare chest, then threw it to the side-floor. Eyes never leaving her, he continued forward.

Ailinn rose on watery legs as Hakon uttered something in his Norse tongue and closed the distance.

"I do not understand." Her grip tightened around the distaff, and she edged backward.

Again Hakon spoke, these words different, though as incomprehensible as the first.

"*N' on digná tu.* I do not understand. Leave me be!"

The ankle cuff bit into her flesh as the chain jarred to its end and held fast. Still, she strove to draw back, straining against the bonds, her leg and the linkage stretched tight.

Hakon bridged the narrow space in an easy stride and clamped iron fingers about her arms. Terror sheared through Ailinn as he hauled her against his rock-hard chest. Frantically she thrashed and pitched within his hold but gained no advantage. A slim hope glimmered—a single word. Yet, as the name of her grizzled protector rose in her throat and reached her lips, it was crushed beneath Hakon's bruising mouth.

Ailinn cried against the assault, her pleas stifled beneath his ravaging kiss. Desperate, she angled the distaff and stabbed for his side.

Hakon snarled and wrenched back as the stick caught him low across the waist. Knocking the piece from her hands, he thrust Ailinn to the floor, then dropped to cover her. But she rolled from under him and clambered to gain the side-floor. Hakon aided her efforts as he grasped her about the waist and tossed her up onto fur throws.

Pain tore at Ailinn's leg as the chain jolted against its limits once more. In the skip of a heartbeat Hakon flung himself atop her. Pinning her arms, he pressed her into the pelts. She felt the hard length of his ravenous passion as he ground his hips against her.

Yanking at the folds of her skirt, he bared her leg and swept his roughened hand upward over thigh and hip to capture her buttock. Forcing her against him, Hakon seized her lips in a brutal kiss.

Ailinn writhed beneath him, each breath hard won, the air pressed from her lungs. Just when she feared she might suffocate, he shifted. Grasping the fullness of her breast, he coarsely caressed her. Ardor blazed in his eyes. Impatient, Hakon fisted the gown's neckline and tore it free.

Crippling fear overtook Ailinn as the fabric ripped. The sound of it filled her ears, then changed and swelled in volume to an earsplitting roar. Just as cool air touched her breast, Hakon's weight abruptly left her. He catapulted backward by an unseen force, and Ailinn next found herself staring up through open space at the rafters.

Twisting, she caught sight of Skallagrim as he hurled Hakon across the room. Like a great, raging bear he set upon Hakon. Dragging him to his feet, he slogged him in stomach and jaw, then backhanded him across the face.

Hakon hurtled backward against the side-floor, yelling out as his ribs struck against the edge of board. Mouth and nose bleeding, a cut above his eye, he stirred to gain some advantage.

But Skallagrim's fury stormed unabated. Grabbing an ax down from the wall, he clutched the shaft at each end then started once more for Hakon. As Hakon recovered his footing, Skallagrim caught him straight on with the ax handle. Ramming it across Hakon's throat, he shoved him up against one of the hall's stout posts, nearly lifting him from his feet.



"Cease, Uncle!" Hakon rasped beneath the wood. "Would you kill me for a mere kiss of your slave? I did but seek a taste of her lips and pleasure my hand with her breasts."

"You lie," Skallagrim snarled in his face.

"*Nei*," Hakon spat with disdain. "I would not spoil your prized gift to the Byzantine. I have not forgotten her usefulness to you."

Skallagrim eyed him with a hard, incisive gaze. "See that you remember," he bit out. " 'Twill be a long journey, Hakon. Take what slavewomen you will to satisfy your lusts for the duration. But be assured, touch this one and I shall personally cut your throat, nephew or not."

At that, Skallagrim released Hakon. Angrily Hakon snatched up his tunic from the side-floor and stalked from the hall.



Ailinn gripped the wreckage of fabric to her breast. Eyes wide and nerves racked raw, she trembled violently as her grim-faced master approached.

The chieftain looked down on her, marked her ruined dress, the fear in her eyes, and then examined her for bruises. Freeing the chain from the post, he led Ailinn to the back of the hall, where he secured her, as the night before, to the foot of his bed.

As Ailinn huddled upon the pallet, Skallagrim positioned his great chair to face the door, then took up his seat. Placing his ax across his lap, he kept watch, prepared for anyone who would give challenge or dare to thwart his plans.

The twins trotted happily along the lane ahead of their uncle, their little mouths puckered around a piece of honeycomb.

As they approached the *hus*, Lyting lengthened his stride to catch up with them, then pushed open the door before sticky little hands could touch it.

Aleth greeted them with a smile and shake of her head as the three entered, licking their fingers and lips.

“Lyting, how you do spoil the children!” She laughed, catching up a damp cloth and coming forward.

Her smile widened as, one after the other, Richard and Kylan offered up their portions of the waxy comb for her to taste.

“*Merci. Mais non, mes petits.* Though, mayhap we best tidy you up before you give your *maman* and *papa* a big hug.” Aleth swept a glance to Lyting. “You as well.” She raised on tiptoe to wipe a trace of honey from his chin.

Lyting chuckled at her motherly attentions and shifted the small crock of golden nectar from beneath his arm.

“For you, my lady. A small token. How would men such as we fare without your tender ministrations?” He winked at the boys.

“You could use a little fussing over,” she chided, tugging at one of the long, pale locks that reached low on Lyting’s chest. “When you are of a mind to part with some of this bountiful mane, come to me. I shall see that you have a fine cut.”

“Soon, Aleth.” He flashed her a smile, the creases deepening in his cheeks. “I confess, I do not look forward to the tonsure and have been enjoying the full wealth and measure of my hair these months past. But ‘tis yours for the shearing when the time comes.”

Lyting gave over the jar to Aleth, then glanced toward the door at the rear of the *skali*.

“They are in the yard,” Aleth offered as she set the crockery on the side floor. Kneeling to the boys’ height, she began wiping Kylan’s face. “Be along with you, now.” She shooed him blithely. “I’ll bring the boys in a moment.”

“*Pakk*, Aleth.”

As Lyting emerged from the building, he beheld Brienne, all grace and loveliness, sitting beneath an ancient silver lime tree. She looked off to the right, her elegant profile silhouetted against the dark luxury of her hair, which flowed freely, as Rurik preferred.

The lime spread out all about her, above and behind, shimmering with pale green foliage. Translucent and heart-shaped, the leaves were richly silvered underneath with fine hairs so that each new breath of air stirred them to glitter and wink with sunlight, the effect spellbinding.

Had it not been for the faint line that traced Brienne’s forehead, Lyting would have thought her to be merely preoccupied, lost in pleasant thoughts. But now he saw that her gaze was fixed on Rurik where he stood stone still, gazing out over the fence, a parchment in his hand.

Brienne began to lift a hand toward Rurik and her lips parted softly as though she would speak. But then she hesitated, apparently deciding otherwise, and let her hand fall once more to her lap. As though Rurik sensed her thoughts, he looked toward her and met her eyes. Lyting felt the fine strand of tension spun out between them.

Uncertain of the scene, Lyting cleared his throat. The two turned as one, Brienne smiling with a genuine warmth and gladness to see him, Rurik coming away from the corner of the yard to greet him.

Feeling the moment to be yet awkward, Lyting glanced again to the spectacular tree and attempted to lighten the mood.

“My lady has chosen her time well,” he teased gently. “For all its glory, one is not able to long enjoy the shelter of the lime. Soon ‘twill begin to drop a sticky dew from its leaves and continue until summer’s end—a vexsome trial for even its most devoted admirer.”

“Mayhap ‘twould be worth enduring.” Brienne lifted her gaze and scanned the luminous canopy overhead.

Just then Rurik came to stand beside her, propping his foot upon the bench where she sat. Brienne placed her hand on his knee, her violet eyes coupling with his.

“My dear husband holds that the lime is much like a beautiful woman, difficult to possess and not without her trials. Each ordeal, he says, is a testing of a man’s true mettle—his steadfastness and determination. A testing of his very heart and soul.”

Lyting swept his gaze to the tree, all expression deserting his face. Golden-brown eyes and deep auburn hair shimmered before his mind’s eye as one with the leaves. He blinked away the vision and suddenly became aware that his heart had picked up its beat and his blood pulsed through his veins.

The boisterous invasion of children broke the spell. Giggling and squealing, the twins scurried across the yard and into the arms of their parents. Lyting stepped apart and rubbed a hand across his eyes. When he glanced back, he met Brienne’s silent, questioning gaze, her head tilted to one side.

Kylan quickly reclaimed his mother’s attention, placing small hands to her cheeks and turning her face to his. Rurik, meanwhile, had plucked up young Richard and perched him on a hip. Irrepressible, the babe tugged to be higher and would not be satisfied until he could wrap his arms about his father’s neck.

Rurik chuckled. Giving over the parchment to Lyting, he disengaged his young heir and resettled him against his chest. At once Richard began to pat at his father’s chin.

Lyting’s gaze dropped to the cockled vellum as it curled in on itself. It bore precise, heavily inked characters. He recognized them to be Greek.

His brow rose a fraction. A message from the East? Byzantium? It had been years since Rurik served there as one the emperor’s elite Varangian Guard.

He skimmed the parchment once again. What nature of missive did the scroll contain? he wondered. Surely it held importance to have been transmitted from so great a distance and after so many years of silence. Its content obviously troubled his brother.

Lyting cut a glance to Rurik and found him watching. With a brief nod Rurik indicated he should examine the document more closely, then turned to walk about the yard with Brienne and the children.

Unscrolling the piece, Lyting studied the rows of neat, compact lettering. At first glance the script appeared as thwarting as the Roman system of writing. He had begun instruction in both forms—Greek and Latin—under the tutelage of Brother Bernard in preparation for Corbie.

His grasp for the Greek, though rudimentary, far exceeded his capacity for the latter. But then Greek was already familiar to him. He’d studied it years past when he readied to join Rurik and the Varangians in the East. To that end his brother had dispatched a Byzantine scholar to Limfjord to instruct him personally in the language and strict codes of court etiquette. But he never reached the golden city, for Norwegian Harald struck Danmark and ravaged Jutland’s western coast. Abandoning the prospect of a bright future with the Guard, he took up sword and shield to defend his homeland. Sailing with the Danish fleet, he engaged the Norwegians on the North Sea

Laboriously Lyting’s gaze moved across the script as he sounded out each letter, each word, groping for the meaning. Someone had died, a Varangian—Askel the Red. The name rang familiar, but Lyting could not connect it with any accounting that he might have heard. Other names followed, these also Norse. The parchment was dated five months prior at Dyrrachium, signed by one Stephanites Cerularius. Again, the name held no significance.

“Some ale, Lyting?” Aleth proffered a cup at his elbow.

Lyting pulled his gaze from the text and accepted her offering. “*Pakk*, Aleth.” As he drew on the liquid, he caught sight of Kylan yawning hugely in his mother’s arms.

“You have exhausted these little ones, Lyting,” Brienne called out. “They shall need their naps early.”

Aleth crossed to disencumber Rurik of little Richard, who was rubbing his eyes. As the women advanced toward the *hus* with the children, Lyting saw Brienne's gaze stray to the parchment. She hugged her son to herself, though her smile remained fastened in place.

"*Merci* for amusing the boys, Lyting." Her words gave no hint that anything disturbed her. "Mayhap I shall be able to enjoy a little rest myself."

Lyting regarded Brienne as she disappeared into the darkness of the *hus*. Withdrawing his gaze, he rolled the letter closed and tapped it thoughtfully against his palm. With unhurried pace he approached Rurik and extended the scroll.

"We sailed for Hedeby earlier than first you intensioned. 'Twas for this, was it not?"

Rurik nodded, his eyes somber as he accepted back the parchment.

Lyting dredged distant memories and long-forgotten conversations from the backwaters of his mind.

"Askel the Red—did he not serve under your command in Constantinople?"

"*Já*. Askel was one of my finest officers. He, Koll, Leidolf, Thengil, and Vegeir were as my right hand when we quelled the palace uprising and preserved Leo's crown. It earned us the title of the 'Dragons Around the Throne.' "

Lyting recognized the last three names from the scroll,

"I recall the tale, though the details be somewhat clouded now. You foiled a plot to assassinate the emperor, Leo Sophos, and his infant son. 'Twas a rather elaborate conspiracy, was it not? Knotted with complexities, double-dealings, deceits. A 'tangle of vipers,' you called it, 'nesting in every corner.' "

"*Já*. Distinctively 'Byzantine'." A grim smile etched Rurik's lips. "I never told you the full of it, *broðir*. But mayhap 'tis well that I do so now, for I know not where this will lead." He looked to the scroll, venting a breath, then met Lyting's gaze.

"I joined the palace guard shortly after Leo's third wife had died, and he had taken Zoë Carbonopsina as his mistress. The Church's Eastern 'Greek' branch is more rigid in matters of marriage than Rome. Even in the event a spouse dies, second marriages are frowned upon and third marriages strictly prohibited. Leo, himself, had reinforced the Church's position years earlier, issuing a special law of his own. But then his first wife died childless, as did his second. When he took a third wife, 'twas an open breach with the Church. But soon she, too, died, leaving Leo without male issue."

Rurik pushed a hand through his golden hair and stepped toward the lime tree.

"A fourth marriage was beyond question. I can tell you that Leo's brother, Alexander, was well pleased that the line of succession should pass to him. But then Zoë conceived. Leo saw to it that she spent her confinement in the palace's 'purple chamber,' where all the empresses officially birthed their children. Zoë presented Leo with a son, and from that time he devoted himself to seeing his heir legitimized.

"After much controversy, the Patriarch agreed to baptize the child in the Hagia Sophia and to christen him Constantine Porphyrogentius, 'born in the purple.' But 'twas a condition that Leo set aside Zoë. Instead, three days after the ceremony, Leo married Zoë and elevated her to the status of Augusta."

Rurik began to pace. "A storm of angry protest arose, fueling the many factions and quarrels that beset Leo from the past. He was even barred from entering the church on Christmas Day and again, twelve days later, on the Feast of the Epiphany. Yet, Leo was intractable. Resolute. He turned to Rome, circumventing the Patriarch's authority, and appealed directly to the Pope—much to the Pontiff's delight. Leo received his dispensation. His marriage was validated. With that accomplished, he forced the Patriarch, Nicholas Mysticus, from his chair and replaced him with another.

"You can imagine the response that wrought." Rurik threw a hand to the air. "The political parties—the Greens and the Blues—the exiled Patriarch, a score of others, each with its own squabble, all clawing for power and profit." He stopped his pacing. "And then there was the emperor's brother, Alexander, an indolent, self-pleasuring creature who had much to lose."

Rurik expelled a long breath, lifting his face heavenward and bracing his hands on his hips. "Mayhap 'twas best, *broðir*, that you did not come to Constantinople as we planned. Sharks swam about the throne. Death waited in the shadow of the crown."

Rurik fell to a reflective silence.

Lyting bided the moment, digesting all his brother spoke.

“And what of the plot to remove Leo?” he prompted several minutes later.

“ ‘Twas nearly the emperor’s undoing.” Rurik paced to the fence, then turned.

“Shall we say, I ‘intercepted’ secret directives that involved a conspiracy to murder the Imperial family—exclusive of Alexander, that is. The assassins plotted to provoke the Blues and Greens to riot in the Hippodrome while the emperor was in attendance. Riots in the Hippodrome are also distinctively ‘Byzantine.’ “

Rurik’s mouth set in a firm line, his features darkening with memory.

“The riots were intended to conceal their treachery. The emperor’s assassins would already be positioned in close proximity to his person—presumably trusted, high-ranking members of court to enjoy such privilege of access. We knew not their names. Meanwhile, within the Sacred Imperial Palace, the child and empress were to be slain.

“With this knowledge in hand, I chose five of my most capable officers, and together we laid schemes of our own to snare the conspirators. The emperor proved cooperative, though he insisted he keep his appearance in the Hippodrome and force his opponents’ hands openly. Zoë feared for him but refused to leave the imperial grounds for safety, preferring to die in the purple if necessary. The child, we managed to spirit from the palace in Helena’s care and kept them both under heavy guard elsewhere in the city.”

Lyting’s eyes snapped to Rurik’s. *Helena*. The noble lady who once held his brother’s heart in Byzantium. The cause of Rurik’s years of wandering. He had not known that she aided him in preserving Leo’s throne and family.

Rurik shifted his stance. “The designated day came. Our Varangians were carefully posted about the palace grounds and throughout the Hippodrome. Another complement guarded the empress in her private residence, the Pantheon. I, myself, and my officers escorted Leo to the imperial box, the *kathisma*, which overlooked the arena from an upper balcony in the Hippodrome. Dignitaries and courtiers awaited us in the royal box. They were our chief concern.

“The mood of the crowd was sullen that day. Early in the games, an upheaval erupted below, then spread through the spectators like a rapid fire feeding on dry kindling. During the tumult, the conspirators made their move.”

“ ‘Twas your own blade,” Lyting recalled aloud, “that smote the assassins’ steel and saved the imperial neck. You shielded the emperor with your body, did you not?”

“*Já*. I to the fore, while Askel guarded both our backs. I felled two of them, Vegeir a third. The trio proved to be patricians of high office, one a member of the Senate. We quickly removed the emperor to safety, but it took hours to quell the broil below. The Blues and Greens had taken over the arena. Scores were arrested and interrogated.”

Rurik turned and braced his hands on the fence, slightly crushing the parchment.

“Though the conspiracy lay shattered and most involved seized, ‘twas plain that we had not apprehended the architect of the scheme. Personally, ‘twas my belief that he served Alexander, but every trail we followed evaporated before we could discover its end. He simply faded chameleonlike into the sea of officials and retainers that surrounded the throne.

“Of course, he might not have survived the revolt. Many died in the affray. When I left Constantinople, ‘twas with the frustration that, dead or alive, he had eluded my grasp. And, if he had survived, ‘twas likely he yet abetted the emperor’s degenerate brother.”

Lyting watched the muscle flex along Rurik’s jaw as he obviously grappled with that frustration once more. Rurik, he knew, would never have left the city had it not been for Helena’s death. Shortly after Rurik routed the conspirators, the emperor lavished honors and riches on him and his officers. Leo had intended to elevate Rurik to one of the privileged ranks so that he might reward him further with Helena’s hand in marriage. But Helena fell suddenly ill and died within days. After her funeral Rurik left Byzantium and took up the life of trading—a hollow man, until he came to Normandy. . . .

“Since my leave-taking,” Rurik broke into Lyting’s thoughts, “I have maintained loose ties with the Guard and kept an ear open for news from the East. The year I came to Valsemé, Leo died—a natural death. Alexander usurped the throne with little delay and exiled Zoë to a nunnery. My men kept careful

watch to see if anyone aided him, but Alexander was so intoxicated with his own power 'twould seem he heeded no man's counsel. Scarcely a year passed when he, too, died. Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus, whom Alexander had recalled, took control as head of the Council of Regency for young Constantine.

"His rule proved as brief as Alexander's, for this year past, another palace revolution occurred, led by Zoë and her generals. Zoë expelled the Patriarch and assumed power in the name of her son. She rules today, bedeviled with many of the old contentions along with new ones she inherited from Alexander and the Patriarch, namely a war with the Bulgarians. Adrianople has already fallen, and now they move on Dyrrachium. Many of our Varangians have joined the Byzantines in the field to repulse the Bulgarians including Askel." Rurik paused and reached for the wide silver armband that encircled his left forearm.

"Before departing Constantinople, Askel felt an urgency to send me this."

He drew off the piece and held it forth to Lyting.

Taking the band, Lyting examined it. As he turned it over, his gaze fell to the runes engraved on the underside. These he read with relative ease:

The spider yet spins in the palace of the Caesars.

Leidolf, Thengil, Vegeir dead.

His gaze went immediately to Rurik, then to the parchment. He drew a brow downward as he puzzled the armband and the letter. Something felt amiss. Darkly amiss.

"Does the letter reveal what befell Askel in Dyrrachium? In truth, I could unravel little of it. Who is this Stephanites Cerularius? 'Tis odd that he should write you of Askel, and that he names the others as well."

Rurik opened out the parchment. "He claims to be a friend of Askel's. Evidently he commands a *skutatoi*, an infantry unit, mainly of spearmen. He admired Askel's skill with spears and they struck a friendship. According to Stephanites, Askel confided the information contained in this letter and directed that, should he die, Stephanites was to see it set down and dispatched it to me through the merchants of Hedeby."

Lyting rubbed his hand along his jaw, an obscure thought nettling at the back of his brain. "And what of Askel's missive?"

"He apprised Stephanites that Thengil and Vegeir died of a sudden and suspicious sickness, 'not unlike Helena.' Leidolf was found murdered in the men's baths. 'Twas Askel's belief that the one we ever sought—the one behind the plot against Leo and his family—had resurfaced and was carefully removing the 'Dragons' from 'around the throne.' There is no telling who this man now serves. Ten-year-old Constantine is the last in the line of the Macedonians. Askel feared that Zoë and her son are again in grave danger."

Lyting's brows drew together. "Yet, if that is so, why did he leave Constantinople for Dyrrachium? Though there are many Varangians serving in the palace guard, that left only Koll from the original six to try to expose the man."

"I have no solid answer." Rurik shook his head. "It makes little sense unless Askel was on the scent of something."

"Or someone."

"Exactly. Stephanites says 'twas not a Bulgarian's blade that felled Askel. He disappeared from nightwatch. His body was found the next morning in the desert."

"Then Askel *was* tracking someone."

"Or mayhap followed out of the city."

"Still, there is something I do not understand." Lyting's thoughts congealed at last as that which plagued him came to the fore of his mind. "Askel took pains to send you an encrypted message from Constantinople—in runes, secreted on the back of an arm bracelet—as though he knew not whom to trust. Why, then, once in the field, would he detail the entire story—not to a Varangian bound by a code of brotherhood—but to a Byzantine soldier? From what you have told me, you six tasted full well of Byzantine duplicity."

"I have been struggling with that as well," Rurik agreed. "When I remind myself that 'twas Stephanites, not Askel, who authored the letter, it begins to come clear."

Rurik held Lyting's gaze, the blue of his eyes draining to a flinty gray.

“ ‘Tis my belief the letter is a lure, designed to draw me back to Byzantium, with Helena as the prime bait. It intimates that, like the rest, she, too, was murdered. He who wrote those lines knew full well that I could not bide to leave them rest.”

Lyting marked the complexity of emotion that passed through Rurik's face. “Then you think Stephanites is Askel's murderer?”

“I know nothing with surety. Much lies in darkness.” Rurik brooded for a moment. “One thing is certain, however. Neither Askel nor Stephanites knew that I had abandoned my life of trading and now rule a barony in Francia with a wife and sons. Both sought to reach me through Hedeby, knowing it to be a major crossroad and market center of the North. That proved wise on their parts for the pieces found me easily enough. They came into the keeping of Issac the Jew, an old acquaintance, but he is too feeble to journey south anymore. He sent word with the ships bound for Normandy, and safeguarded the items here.”

Lyting nodded, recalling the messenger, one of Issac's kindred. “Have you determined what course you will take?” Lyting handed him back the arm bracelet.

“*Nei*. I need think on this longer. Even if Stephanites proves false, I doubt he is more than an underling for the viper behind all this. I'll examine the band and scroll further and ask about. Most of our Norse merchants traveling the Eastern routes are Sverige-men, as are the Varangians. Mayhap I can glean something of value from them. There appears to be an abundance of Sverige-men here in Hedeby this season.”

“I think Ketil would agree.” A smile touched Lyting's lips, then dimmed. “Do you think to journey to the Great City yourself? To Miklagård?”

Rurik pressed his eyes closed a moment, then drew a long breath as he straightened and regarded Lyting.

“If one thing distinguishes a Varangian, 'tis his fierce loyalty to the 'throne of the Caesars.' 'Tis a loyalty he carries in his veins till the day his blood flows no more. And yet, for myself, there are new loyalties of equal import. They bind me by oath to duke and king alike, to Normandy and Francia. And there are my people of Valsemé, and, not the least, my family which I am loathe to leave. Still, Zoë and Constantine need be warned, and I would make contact with Koll. The possibility of Helena murdered tears at me, I confess. But as to whether I will undertake this journey, I have no answer.”

Rurik tucked the parchment inside his tunic and slipped the band onto his arm. “Sorry to burden you, *broðir*, but I thought you need know should anything befall—”

He broke off the grim thought, then affected a smile. “I think I shall envy you your peaceful days at Corbie in some ways.”

Brienne came forth from the *hus* just then and started toward him. The blue returned to his eyes, and he broke into an open smile.

“And in other ways I shall not.” Rurik's gaze shone down on Brienne as she stepped into his arms.

Lyting watched as Rurik secured Brienne against his side and dropped a kiss to her lips. Rurik continued to hold her as though he did so against the moment he might have to part from her.

Lyting dropped away his gaze, a tide of conflicting emotions sweeping through him. He glanced to the shimmering tree, then back again and caught the last of what Brienne spoke.

“The children are sleeping soundly. Ketil returned and has taken Aleth out. It seems he is anxious to spend more coin on her, but he would not say what has taken his eye this time.” She laughed.

“I, too, shall take my leave.” Lyting chafed to be moving, the familiar restlessness returned tenfold. “Unless there is some task you need me to attend, *broðir*, there are some purchases I would also make.”

“Ah, Anskar's bell,” Brienne said mindfully. “ 'Twill be a fine addition to Valsemé's church.”

Lyting's brows lifted with surprise. He had forgotten the bell since his encounter with Stefnir. In truth, 'twas combs he would seek and a very long walk.

“*Já*, the bell,” he repeated, wholly distracted. “I'll leave by the side yard so I don't risk waking the babes.”



Brienne's gaze followed Lyting as he departed. Pensive, she leaned into Rurik's chest and watched Lyting's bright head and broad shoulders disappear down the lane.

"When first I saw Lyting," she reminisced, "he was shrouded in a monk's garb. It did not seem to befit him then, nor does the thought of him wearing it now."

"Are you of the same mind as Ketil, *ástin mín*?" Rurik bent to the sensitive spot behind her ear.

"Mayhap." She tingled at the warmth of his mouth and touch of his tongue. "You are the one least surprised by Lyting's decision to take the cowl."

"I simply hold my peace." Rurik began a slow, downward path, pressing kisses along her neck.

Brienne wavered as shivers of fire showered her throat and shoulder. Reluctantly she resisted the sensations spiraling through her. Leaning back in the circle of Rurik's arms, she gave him an expectant eye.

Rurik drew her against himself once more, undeterred, and brushed his lips against her midnight hair.

"You would have to have known Lyting in his youth and what it was like for him to grow up as youngest to a half brother like . . ." He stopped short of voicing Hastein's name aloud.

"How so, love?" Brienne pressed, quivering as the tip of his tongue traced the shell of her ear. "How could *that one* have possibly affected Lyting's call to the monastic life?"

Rurik pulled back with a sigh, realizing Brienne would own no ease till she had a fuller explanation. He sent up a small, hope-filled prayer that the twins would nap long and deep, and that the others would find much to occupy themselves for the coming hours. He would yet savor this time alone with his ravishing wife. With temporary resignation he covered her hands with his own.

"Our half brother bedeviled Lyting from infancy, just as he did every other living creature. Have you noticed how ever vigilant Lyting is? How keenly alert? Like the forest animals he so loves, 'tis near impossible to steal up on him. Even when he appears asleep, 'tis only a light, surface sort of slumber he keeps. Always with a sword at hand. 'Tis born of the hazards he endured in his youth. The constant threat of our half brother's shadow."

Sadness filled Brienne as she envisaged the ordeal of Lyting's childhood. She knew firsthand of Hastein's twistedness, having witnessed the full magnitude of his barbarity unleashed upon her brother-in-law.

"It must have been horribly difficult for him. But how did that bear on his resolve to enter Corbie?"

Rurik turned over her hands in his as memories of his own youth glanced through him. He leveled his gaze over the top of her head.

"My brothers were a study in contrast. The one, malicious and spiteful, who derived pleasure in tormenting the most innocent of creatures. The other, profoundly humane and caring, who, despite danger to himself, came ever behind, righting the wrongs, easing the suffering. Even as a small lad, Lyting took it upon himself to rectify our half brother's cruelties. Like you with your herbs, love, he was a healer of sorts, tending the injuries of animals he found callously brutalized and left to die—putting them from their misery only when faced with no other choice. That deeply affected him. He deplored the senselessness of it all.

"As he grew in height and strength, he aided those children younger, pitting himself against our half brother with varying results. Not all the scars he bears were gained that night he defended you, *ástin mín*, though most were inflicted by the same one's blade."

Seeing the pain that creased Brienne's features, Rurik drew her against him and stroked her hair.

"Now Lyting wishes to right the ills of Normandy wrought by our kindred. Never was he part to their plunderings in Francia. He arrived shortly after the king concluded his treaty with Rollo. Lyting was swift to embrace Christ's cross from the first. Far quicker than I," he added with a smile.

Brienne tipped her face upward and searched Rurik's face. "Then you think Lyting *should* enter Corbie?"

"I simply trust his judgment."

Brienne's lips parted to speak, but he placed a finger there. "Ástin mín, Lyting must follow his own heart's calling."

Brienne gave a smile and small nod of agreement.

"Now, love"—Rurik's eyes glowed softly—"shall we discuss my brother the day long or avail ourselves of the fine new mattress of eiderdown that awaits us within?"

He trailed kisses over her temple, cheek, and jaw and teased her lips apart. "I would favor a set of daughters to match our sons," he whispered against her mouth, then drew her into a deep, intoxicating kiss.

Brienne melted into Rurik, her passion climbing to meet his. Vaguely she felt her feet leave the earth and herself lifted high, deliciously weightless in the power of his arms. Without breaking their kiss, Rurik carried her toward the *hus*.

Crossing through the portal, Brienne caught a last glimpse of the silver lime, sparkling and winking on a breeze. As it passed from sight, she wondered hazily where the "heart's calling" would lead her noble brother-in-law.



A fire burned in Lyting's soul. He traveled the streets of Hedeby—north to south, east to west five times over and five times more. Pace unabating, he drove himself on, a boil of argument.

Mounting the steep ladder to the crown of defense works, he circled the town once, twice, thrice. At last he halted and braced his hands against the low timbered wall.

Below spread that small portion of the world that was Danmark, stretching forth to the grayed rim of the horizon. Lyting focused on the distance. He skimmed the muted line where sky met earth, then allowed his thoughts to slip past and continue on with mind's sight across the heath.

Southward rose the great Danevirke severing Danmark from Frisia and the East Frankish kingdom. Farther to the south and somewhat west lay Francia, his adopted homeland. There he committed himself by sword and by oath, the sum of his days for three years passing contained in a single word—Valsemé. Another name waited there to encompass his future—that of Corbie.

Lyting moved along the battlement to gaze westward. Across a short portage the rivers Rheide, Treene, and Ejder flowed into one another and connected to the North Sea—once his battlefield. Beyond that vast body, lay the land of the Saxons and the isle of the Celts. From those fertile shores came the maid of fire and beauty to haunt him with her golden-brown eyes.

On he strode atop the great earthen mound, past the towers and woodworks. He paused to gaze northward, reaching across time and distance with heart's memory to the magnificent blue waterways of the Limfjord and the place of his birth. There was he formed and nurtured. There did he grow to manhood.

At what age had he realized that Limfjord did not hold his future? When had he first perceived that his destiny lay apart from her? And yet, Lyting mused, when he sought to journey east, he found himself west. And when he thought to return to the family's holdings in north Jutland, his father bid him south to Normandy. He had not returned since.

At length Lyting came to stand and look eastward. He tarried a while, arrested by the light fracturing the surface of the Schlei as it coursed slowly toward the Baltic. Across that near-tideless sea lay the passage to Byzantium.

Lyting closed his hands to fists. Where did his destiny abide now? Where in God's holy truth did the Almighty intend that he serve?

Guilt rode him. He chastised himself for not having offered at once to sail in his brother's stead for Constantinople. Purposely he held back. Underlying his impulse to aid Rurik was his increasing obsession with the maid of Eire. 'Twas the thought of her that spurred him to voice his willingness to undertake the journey. In truth, the words nearly tripped from his tongue. But if last night's dreams be counted, his motives were not so high-minded. His first act of the day was spent, not on bent knee in prayer, but in the icy river, quenching the passions kindled in sleep, quelling their obvious effect.

Saints breath! What madness possessed him? The girl belonged to Skallagrim. *Skallagrim*, he emphasized sternly. And the chieftain commanded a *drakkar* of warriors eager to safeguard her from all, including himself.

Did he imagine to join the convoy and keep guard of her on the journey east? To what end? To see the maid safely into the arms of the Byzantine? Or, mayhap, escape with her into the mountains, forests, or grasslands—all crawling with fierce barbarians?

And what of Rurik's missive to the empress Zoë and young Constantine? 'Twould still need to be delivered. Still necessary to reach Miklagård and hazard the reprisal of his choleric kinsmen.

Lyting tossed back his mane of hair and set his face to the heavens.

Mayhap 'twas all a testing. Brother Bernard warned that the path of the religious be an onerous one, beset with many trials, most especially those of the flesh.

From the first, he resolved he would embrace the devout life only if confident he could honor the requisite vows. He would not live a lie. To that end, he self-imposed his own trials and took up the practice—*nei*, the cross—of celibacy.

"God's mercy," Lyting muttered suddenly aloud, frustration shunting through him. He thought he had mastered his earthly desires. Yet, since arriving in Hedeby, he had spent most of his hours concerned with the girl, either standing watch in alleys or taking long swims. He felt weary, embattled—spirit and flesh warring within.

Lyting closed his eyes, drew a breath, and steadied his thoughts.

Rurik gave no indication that he would ask him to delay his entry into Corbie and voyage east. Certainly, he was the logical choice due to their ties of kinship and his training in the language and court formalities. Still, others were capable of the task. They need only make contact with Koll—if he be yet alive—or the Varangians. Rurik could supply names and directives. There also remained the possibility that his brother would choose to return to the imperial city himself.

Depleted by his hours of roaming and arguing in endless circles with himself, Lyting headed toward the ladder and began to descend. Stefnir came to mind.

If Skallagrim joined the raiders solely for quick plunder, as Stefnir had said, then it stood to reason that few, if any, of the *Wind Raven's* crew would sail with the chieftain for Byzantium—only the merchantmen among them, and not all those would be destined for Miklagård.

Hakon would for a certainty.

Lyting halted as his foot met with solid ground. If Stefnir's words be true, Hakon purposed to defy his uncle and possess the maid for himself.

Lyting steeled himself, his warrior's blood stirring in the well of his soul.

Corbie had stood for centuries and would remain for many more, he reasoned. Certainly, 'twould be there the day he sought her door.

But time ran short for the child emperor and his mother. And for the beautiful maid of Eire.



Lyting swept through the portal of the *hus* and into the *skali*, a swirl of cloak and energy.

Ketil and Aleth looked up from where they sat on the side floor, playing a game of draughts. Brienne paused in bathing the children, and Rurik turned where he stood before the hearth. On a small, scarred bench next to him the parchment from Dyrrachium lay open.

Lyting crossed the hall, his bearing charged with power and purpose. Picking up the document, he raised his eyes and met Rurik's gaze directly.

"On the day you became baron, *broðir*, I plighted you my sword oath. Faithfully have I served you, and faithfully do I serve you still. I seek no release from my vow, nor shall I till the day I commit myself to Corbie."

He drew a breath and straightened his stance, resolute in his course.

"By your leave, I shall sail in your stead. I shall deliver your message to Byzantium."

Lyting closed his hand to a fist and struck it over his heart. "By *bouche et des mains*," he reaffirmed his sworn vow, "I am your man."

Ailinn sat quietly upon the fur pelts at the foot of Skallagrim's bed and watched the chieftain as he conversed with one of his men at the portal of the house.

She remembered the man with his coppery hair and brownish beard. Remembered him from the Norsemen's harrowing invasion of the bridal chamber so many weeks ago.

When the man turned and departed, Thora scuffled from her stool by the loom and prodded Skallagrim with questions. At the chieftain's response, she drew her substantial dimensions to full height, paused for the space of a heartbeat, then stirred the hall to motion.

Ailinn fought the urge to shrink back as Thora made an undeviating line toward her, Skallagrim's key in hand, and unshackled her from the bed. At once Thora set her to work, filling extra lamps with oil and wicks and dispersing them about the room.

Trunks were next opened, three in all. Out came brightly embroidered pillows and additional furs to furnish the raised side-floors, then glasswares, carved platters, and drinking horns with silver rims.

Hakon arrived amid the whirl of activity. He remained just outside the door at first and exchanged words with Skallagrim. Moments later he stepped inside.

Ailinn bristled. 'Twas the first time Hakon showed himself at the house since his earlier attack on her. She saw that the cut above his eye had scabbed over, its dark crust in contrast to the angry red flesh swelling beneath.

As Hakon's eyes drew to hers, Ailinn diverted her gaze. She held her attention rigidly to her present task—draining crimson berries from their tub of water and transferring them to a large wooden bowl.

Hakon advanced deeper into the hall, moving unavoidably close in the confines of the room. It was all Ailinn could do to brace herself against the sudden assault of emotions—anger, hatred, bitterness, and fear pounding through her. Just as Hakon reached her, Thora motioned him over and directed him to mount a wide strip of tapestry across the end wall. Ailinn silently vented her relief.

Meanwhile, Thora proceeded to replace the panels of cloth that overlay her gown with fresh ones. Likewise, she exchanged the large oval brooches at her shoulders for a more elaborate pair and suspended strings of glass and amber beads between them, bringing a scowl from Skallagrim. But Ailinn observed that the chieftain had changed his tunic as well and now wore a finely wrought neck ring of polished silver about his throat.

Hakon made no such efforts and took up a place on the settle near the open fire pit to drink a cup of ale. Ailinn thought he looked to sit beneath a dark cloud, so grim was his cast.

At Thora's hurried bidding, Ailinn filled bowls with clotted cream and placed them on a tray with the berries. Thora rushed to arrange platters of food, her tongue and temper sharpening. When Ailinn failed to understand her latest dictate, it brought an angry shout. But Thora restrained her hand as it pulled upward, obviously mindful of Skallagrim and the rewards of his displeasure.

Ailinn kept her gaze from the discolorations along Thora's neck and arms, and dared not draw attention to herself—to the bodice of her gown where Thora's forced handiwork rejoined the jagged tear, or to Murieann's coveted girdle which now lay upon her own hips by Skallagrim's command.

Hostility flashed like heat lightning in the depths of the Norsewoman's eyes as Ailinn continued to stand unmoving. Thora took Ailinn by the arm and propelled her to the far end of the hearth. There, she drove her to her knees and left her cooking oatcakes on the stone slab that spanned the hearth's width.

Ailinn exhaled, thankful for the respite. As she turned the little cakes, she wondered for the first time what had prompted the hasty preparations. But before she could ponder it, Hakon shifted his position into the fringe of her vision. Ailinn tensed. Calmly he drew on his cup, reclining on the very spot where, earlier, he sought to violate her.

A knock sounded upon the door, solid and sure.

Ailinn lifted her gaze as Skallagrim moved toward the portal. Thora ceased her bustlings to quickly brush back her hair. Hakon rose slowly to full height. He fixed his stance, feet spread shoulder-width apart, his weight in his heels. Anticipation layered the air. Ailinn found that she, too, held her breath as Skallagrim drew wide the door.

Her eyes rounded. Upon the threshold stood a magnificent-looking man, golden of hair, impressive in stature, and richly dressed. A man of station and consequence. She whispered a glance over his features. Features that were strongly familiar. . . .

Without pause he stepped apart from the door, exposing a second man to view and allowing him forth.

Ailinn's heart leapt wildly as the Dane with starbright hair filled the portal. His entrance brightened the very room itself, sending the shadows to scurry into every crack and corner that the hall possessed.

Ailinn's mouth went dry as his eyes skimmed to hers—a nearly imperceptible motion that he accomplished in the course of his turn to address Skallagrim. The look might have been viewed as a glance to Hakon or Thora, yet his eyes touched hers for one stolen instant, setting her heart and hope on wing.

Had he come for her? Her thoughts skittered and her pulse livened. Mayhap God in His Heaven had not forgotten her after all.

Reason cautioned that the man could have come on any number of matters. Cautioned that, even if he did seek her purchase, he was no more than a murderous heathen like those who had seized her—a barbaric Norseman with a sword's sting upon his cheek—no doubt harsh and cold-blooded.

But her heart ceased to listen as she envisioned the Dane as she'd seen him earlier that day at the river. His affectionate enjoyment of the children and his caring way with them disputed a more violent image.

Ailinn looked to the two men once more. Brothers. They must be brothers, for they favored each other with a powerful resemblance. Both were similar in age, height, and build—warriors, the two of them— one silver, one gold.

Ailinn stayed her thoughts as the men moved toward the hearth with Skallagrim. Conscious of their towering nearness, she gave her attention to the browned cakes and began removing them to a platter.

Above her the introductions and courtesies continued. Thora consumed the men with hungry eyes. She pushed forward of Hakon, smiling and gabbling, eager for Skallagrim to present her. A jarringly girlish laugh escaped her when he did.

Hakon remained lodged in his stance as the chieftain gestured toward him with an open hand and spoke his name in introduction. A pause followed. The golden man acknowledged Hakon with what seemed a spare but formal greeting. The silver warrior made no response.

Ailinn raised her eyes and found the Dane's gaze hardened over Hakon's swollen features. He flicked a glance to Thora, keen to her bruises, then bent his gaze to her, where she knelt at the hearthstone.

Ailinn heated as his eyes traveled over her breast, tracing the entire length of uneven stitches that reached from the neck of her gown nearly to her waist. His gaze turned glacial. In a breath his eyes skimmed over her, questing for marks upon her flesh. Finding none, he shot a look back to Hakon, arrow-swift. The two faced each other without word—Hakon bearing challenge in his posture; the white Dane contemptuous, hard-eyed, piercing Hakon to the marrow with his frigid gaze.

Thora moved off, then returned a moment later with a large cream-colored jar with red markings. She initiated a light chatter as she prepared to present the wine. At the same time she motioned for Ailinn to rise from her place and aid with the drinking horns.

The tension in the air dissipated somewhat. Thora continued to smile and direct a genial flow of words toward her visitors. Yet, when Ailinn met her eyes, she found flames kindled in their depths. 'Twas as though Thora blamed her for drawing the silver warrior's disfavor down upon herself and Hakon.

Taking up two of the ornamented horns, Ailinn waited as Thora filled them with a rich garnet wine. Visibly pleased with the offering, Thora relieved her of one of the vessels and turned to the golden man.

Of the two men he looked to be the older and the one who held title—a lordly figure among Norsemen. The lavish gold brooch at his shoulder and gem-studded buckle at his waist spoke of great wealth.

Were they brothers of royal blood, mayhap?

Her brows flinched downward, for the man's image did not fit this place somehow. She snatched another glimpse. His attire was a mixture of exquisite Nordic jewelry and clothes that were . . . Frankish?

Ailinn blinked. His raiment was much as Bergette once described, both in words and in pictures scratched out upon the earthen floor in her stepuncle's hall. Ailinn pondered this as her eyes slipped over the cross-garters that bound his legs, then drew to the cut of his cloak. The fabric of his tunic could easily be the famed Frisian cloth of the East Franks. Deep blue in color, like that of a midnight sky, the tunic carried a border of gleaming falcons about its hem.

With a sudden flash, Ailinn recalled the two women who had accompanied the white Dane on the previous day when first she encountered him and he sought her purchase. She strove to retrieve the details from memory, but Thora disrupted her thoughts as she grasped the second horn and took it from her hands.

Ailinn's gaze followed the Norsewoman, trailing to the bright-haired Dane while Thora offered him the wine. His garments were Norse in style, unembellished with simple body-skimming lines. Again, the fabric was superior in weave, the same weave as the brother's.

Ailinn's gaze slipped higher, colliding at once with the Dane's brilliant blue eyes, so intense and penetrating. She gasped at the contact and dropped her gaze to the floor.

Heat swept a path over her throat and cheeks. Her heart began to hammer and her hands shake as she took up the remaining vessels and held them for Thora to fill. To Ailinn's dismay, the wine spilled over the rims.

Thora bit out a string of chastisements on a low, tethered breath. Stern-faced, she wiped the dripping horns, then gave them over to Skallagrim and Hakon. Rounding on Ailinn, she motioned her away.

Ailinn strove to clear her thoughts. She continued to cling to a small reed of hope as she took up the tray of berries and cream at Thora's command. Had the Dane come for her? Should she dare pray that he did?

She scoured her mind for what Bergette once told her of the Norse conquests in Francia. She sorely wished now that she'd given the tales closer attention. Foremost, she recalled Bergette's fuming protest of the Northmen's treaty with the Frankish king. They now ruled in *Francia—Normanni*, her nursemaid called them—their domain no less than a duchy, their rough-hewn leader no less than a duke.

Bergette had scoffed that barbarians should be granted fief and title. Unlike Eire, where Northmen erected new settlements on Irish soil and installed their own kings, in Francia the Norse were part of the Frankish nobility itself. Despite her nursemaid's sharp opinion, Ailinn thought some wisdom lay in that. Better to yoke Norse prowess to preserve the rightful throne than allow new kingships to take root and war against the old.

Were these men Normanni then? her thoughts circled back.

Thora nudged Ailinn to take up the platter of hearth cakes and follow her. This she did, bringing along with it the tray with the berries. Her heart quickened and her senses sharpened. How she longed to flee this place and escape the hands of Thora, Hakon, and the unfathomable chieftain, Skallagrim. Surely, her fate with the silver warrior could be no worse than the one she already faced. Indeed, she believed it would be much improved.

Keenly alert, Ailinn waited with Thora while the men settled themselves. Skallagrim offered his great carved seat to the golden lord, then assumed a smaller chair for himself. The white Dane and Hakon took up places on the raised side-floors, directly opposite each other.

Thora proffered her offering of meats and breads. Disappointingly, it passed untouched, though Hakon motioned for more wine. While the Norsewoman stepped apart to retrieve the jar, Ailinn presented her tray to the golden man.

He spoke with the chieftain, his voice deep and rich. She glanced over him, observant to every detail and whatever she might glean. Unexpectedly he lifted his eyes and met hers. Steel blue. They held recognition in their depths. 'Twas as though he knew of her and now compared her to those reports.

Ailinn withdrew her gaze, marking the cleft he bore in his chin. The dark-haired children sprang to mind. They owned like indentations upon their little chins, and their indistinguishable eye color could easily have been the same as his. One of the Frankish women, Ailinn remembered, possessed ebony tresses—the one that was so exceedingly fair.

Ailinn's heart skipped several beats as she turned to serve Skallagrim. Perhaps the woman was this man's wife, not the other's. An effusion of fresh energy washed through her. She sought to scan the golden lord's hand for a ring, but Thora prompted her to serve the others.

Ailinn's breath grew shallow as she moved before the silver warrior and offered him her tray. His eyes reached up to hers and enwrapped her in that clear blue sea. A rush of excitement surged through her, for his gaze held a depth of unspoken words. Certainly he had come for her.

He continued to drink of her with his eyes as he spooned cream and berries onto an oatcake. Pinching up the sides, he took the treat and tasted it. She watched the line of his jaw and his beautifully carved lips as he ate. Again, she met his gaze. His expression revealed naught, though his eyes shined softly upon her.

Thora moved before the white Dane just then and bumped Ailinn aside with one large hip. With a brusque nod of the head, she signaled for Ailinn to remove herself and serve Hakon.

Ailinn gripped the platter and tray tighter. Turning to Hakon, she avoided his eyes but felt his hard stare all the same. He swiped a single cake from the platter and tore it with his back teeth, then downed more wine. Hostility wreathed about him, envenoming the air.

Ailinn began to draw away, but Hakon trapped her wrist. The pressure of his fingers brought her eyes to his as he relieved her platter of another cake. Ailinn fought her revulsion, abhorring his touch. She thought to hear the silver warrior move, but Skallagrim's voice broke over the hall. Hakon released her as the chieftain ordered away the women and their trays.



Skallagrim gulped another mouthful of wine, wiped his mouth with his hand, and eyed the lord of Valsemé.

“My man, Stefmir Hranason, tells me you seek passage to Byzantium, Baron.”

“*Satt*. True.” Rurik nodded. “Though ‘tis my *broðir* who will actually undertake the journey and sail in my stead.”

“The monk?” the chieftain blurted, coming forward in his chair.

Lyting's brow skidded upward. He exchanged a swift, sharp glance with Rurik.

“He *is* to join the Christian priest-class, is he not?” A veiled look came into Skallagrim's eyes. “I have it on your friend's word—the great red-haired bear who serves you.”

Lyting masked his surprise and rose to his feet. Facing the hoary chieftain, he pulled open the neck of his tunic and exposed a silver cross, gleaming against his chest.

Rurik played the moment, lacing his fingers together as though the chieftain tested his patience. “‘Tis a private matter—a mission of grave importance that requires my brother to delay his entrance into the holy brotherhood. Lyting travels as my personal emissary to the very highest levels of the Imperial court.”

Skallagrim elevated a brow, then settled back and sipped his horn, obviously wary, distrustful. “How grave? And how high?”

“None graver. None higher.” Rurik held him with an unwavering gaze. “And potentially profitable to those who keep his company.”

Skallagrim pared Lyting with a critical gaze. His glance slipped past to where his Irish prize stood behind the hearth, then to Hakon, who glared at the younger Atlison's back—when he wasn't sliding glances to the maid.

Skallagrim's jaw hardened at that, his teeth fusing to rock. He looked again to the girl, then fixed his eyes on the baron's brother. Suspicion perched in his eyes. He did not need another cock in the pen.

Despite the silver that Atlison's passage would bring, he would not risk spoiling the girl. Hakon would be enough to manage.

"With respect, Baron, I, myself, am a man of considerable means and significant connections. To my thinking, 'tis your brother who stands to profit by *my* company and the transport I can provide. Of course, others can supply that as easily as I."

Skallagrim gave a shrug then leaned forward. "We sail in convoy to Kiev and on to Constantinople. Truth to tell, what with goods and slaves, I am already pressed for space. The *Wind Raven*, of course, is a warship, too large and fragile for the journey. She must be stored in Gotland. I shall take a lighter, clinker-built vessel from there and change that again in Kiev for a small but sturdy Slav boat that can withstand the rapids of the Dnieper. You can appreciate my limitations, Baron." Skallagrim opened his palm to the air. "I could, perhaps, take your brother as far as Gotland."

Lyting watched as Rurik allowed a mingling of impatience and displeasure to cross his face. They had anticipated the chieftain's resistance and concurred that their best approach lay in appealing to the man's pride and greed. Lyting maintained his silent stance as Rurik's hand moved to his throat and drew on a thong that lay hidden beneath his tunic. He produced a small leather pouch. Slipping the strap over his head, Rurik did no more than hold the bag in sight, baiting Skallagrim.

"I know well of trade routes and ships—firsthand," Rurik emphasized tersely. "I also know how many men and goods each type of ship can hold," he dismissed Skallagrim's excuses. "What I seek is a seasoned voyager, one experienced with the particular perils that are inherent in traveling the Dnieper. My message *must* reach Miklagárd and not fall fallow in the hands of nomadic tribesmen or lost to the bottom of the Dnieper."

Rurik gazed at him levelly. "Stefnir vows you are such a man for the task. To be plainspoken, I give credence to his word only because Lyting does. Stefnir is known to my brother from the years they fought in the king's service upon the seas, preserving Denmark."

Skallagrim's eyes sheered to Lyting, surprise firing them. Rurik pressed on. "I can compensate you with more than mere coin. Through my brother, you can gain access to the one above all who can grant the allowances you seek in the silk trade."

Before the chieftain could question how he came by such knowledge of him, Rurik spread open the bag's puckered mouth and plucked an enameled gold case from its confines. Skallagrim's eyes bulged as Rurik opened the box. Inside nestled a lustrous piece of cloth—silk of Imperial purple.

"'Tis death to the man who secrets silk from Miklagárd!" Skallagrim exclaimed in an astonished breath. "But death most vile to any who would thief dye-goods of the emperor's purple. How did—?"

"I neither secreted nor thieved the silk," Rurik declared resolutely.

Extracting a single golden *solidii* from the royal wrappings, he held it up, exposing the coin's crisp image—a miniature portrait of the Imperial personage.

"'Twas the gift of Emperor Leo Sophos himself."

Skallagrim thumped back in his chair, clearly astonished. A sudden comprehension rippled through his eyes. He wet his lips. "There be tales that persist of a Varangian named Rurik—one of ours, a Dane, not a Swede—who won fame and riches by his daring and later traveled the Volga—"

"The same," Rurik acknowledged, cutting the chieftain short. Before Skallagrim could make further comment, Rurik dangled before him the prize pearl of temptation.

"If you would know, I send my brother to hold audience with the dowager empress, herself."

"Zoë?" Skallagrim near choked with awe.



Ailinn grew restive, unable to comprehend anything of what transpired among the men. She continued to pray desperately that the white Dane had come for her.

Skallagrim had appeared guarded, even quarrelsome, at first. She could not see what the tall Dane revealed to him, for his back confronted her like a wall. But the chieftain's entire countenance and manner altered when the lord brought forth an ornamented box which yielded a golden coin and scrap of purple cloth. Mayhap these men were royals after all.

Her thoughts snapped back as Skallagrim called for more wine. Thora hastened to serve them while the chieftain and the golden lord continued to speak, their words falling in agreeable tones. Meanwhile, the silver warrior resumed his place on the side-floor and readjusted his tunic. Hakon's ill temper continued to smolder visibly, darkening his cast.

Thora fawned over her guests, her excitement saturating the air. Ailinn's heart began to pound solidly once again as Thora motioned for her to bring the trays of cakes and berries.

Had the men struck a bargain, then? Forged some agreement and settled their affairs? Would she be free of this detestable place in the coming moments, trading one future for another?

Ailinn's hands trembled as she stepped before the silver warrior and looked openly into his eyes. She must know. Surely she could read something there. But as their gazes touched, Thora jostled her with a hip, forcing her aside and causing Ailinn to lose her hold on one tray.

It flipped upward, sending a shower of berries into the warrior's lap and a splattering of cream across Thora's nose, mouth, and chest. The bowls and tray clattered noisily to the floor, followed by an enraged screech from Thora. Impulsively the Norsewoman drew back and directed a blow at Ailinn.

Lightning swift, the silver warrior bolted to his feet, blocking Thora's attack with one hand while sweeping Ailinn behind him with the other. Hakon, likewise, bounded to his feet and drew on his sword. But before the steel left its scabbard, the white Dane's blade flashed before him.



Rurik drove from his chair and reached for his hilt, but Skallagrim stayed him.

The chieftain remained seated. Tenting his fingers, he contemplated the scene. His gaze shifted between Lyting and Hakon, then he smiled with satisfaction deep in his beard. Mayhap Atlison *was* the answer to his needs after all. The baron's brother would bring silver to his coffer, audience with the Byzantine empress, and the perfect counterbalance to his most immediate problem—Hakon.

"Lord Rurik, I believe my ship can carry another after all." He squinted an eye over Lyting for one final estimation. "He returns to confine himself to a monastery, you say?"

"The holy brothers prepare his place even now at Corbie."

"Christians," Skallagrim grunted, though obviously content with the answer as he drained the ale from his horn.



The bright-haired Dane and Hakon remained fixed in their stances, steel gleaming in their hands, challenge burning in their eyes. Ailinn clung to her protector, her breasts pressing into his back. She trembled against him as firelight danced along the blades. For one blood-chilling moment she relived her first encounter with Hakon when he burst into the bridal chamber and reaped death at her feet.

She squeezed her lashes shut against the memory, sinking her fingers deeper into the Dane's garments. Desperately she prayed that he would take her from this place and now.

Skallagrim's voice rolled across the room. She heard Thora move off, then the scraping of Hakon's sword as he returned it with measured slowness to its scabbard.

The Dane continued to secure her against himself, his left arm and hand curved back, his long fingers pressed against the curve of her spine. He waited until Hakon had fully resheathed his blade before he restored his own.

Ailinn felt his weight shift and his arm relax. He began to turn and their bodies parted. Cool air rushed between them. Yet, when the Dane's eyes sought hers, Ailinn felt a liquid warmth spread through her, heating her to her toes.

Skallagrim's voice rumbled loudly, dispelling the sensation. Ailinn glanced to the chieftain. Her heart pitched when he motioned for her to withdraw to the pallet at the back of the hall. Anxious, she looked to the white Dane, seeking some sign—any sign—that she should stay by his side.

His gaze held hers, his expression intense, unreadable. Then his lashes dipped and brushed his cheeks. She thought to hear frustration in the breath he released. He raised his clear blue eyes and with a scant nod of his head indicated that she should obey Skallagrim's order.

Ailinn's spirits plunged. Reluctantly she stepped apart, longing for all the world to remain in the stronghold of his shadow, dreading he might leave her here.

She calmed herself as she traversed the room. Mayhap there yet remained matters the men must discuss, arrangements to complete. Thrice had the white Dane appeared in her life—the first and second times by chance, true, but the third with purpose. She felt an unwavering certainty that his visitation this night would affect the course of all of her tomorrows.

Ailinn assumed her place at the foot of Skallagrim's bed and waited, attentive to the men's every gesture and utterance. She held fast to her fragile hopes as the golden lord and Skallagrim rose from their chairs and locked forearms, sealing their bargain. The chieftain turned and clasped the silver warrior's arm as well.

Hope burgeoned as Skallagrim accepted several plump pouches, presumably filled with coin. But could a slave bring such wealth? she wondered, disbelieving any could. The doubt nettled, and her heart tripped a little. Still, she eased toward the edge of the raised side-floor, prepared to spring to her feet and leave at the first sign.

The men conversed a moment longer and drank a final toast from the ornamented horns—all except Hakon, who brooded nearby. Ailinn twisted the fur robe beneath her fingers, then rose to her knees and gripped hold of the bed's carved end post when the three moved toward the door.

Had they forgotten her? Her nails stabbed the wood. She fixed her gaze on the brothers where they stood waiting while Skallagrim drew open the door. The grievous truth crushed down upon her as the men began to depart. The silver warrior had not come for her.

Ailinn's heart plummeted, despair overtaking her. She watched, disconsolate, as the golden lord passed through the door and the white Dane stepped to the portal.

He hesitated upon the threshold and looked back. Their gazes met and held across the room. He then turned and was gone, taking with him his shining presence and her last ray of hope. Ailinn thought her heart would crack.

She sank onto the furs, fighting back her welling tears, tasting sharply of her aloneness. The pull at her ankle cuff and the clank of chains roused her from her gloom. She found Skallagrim shackling her to his bed. A chill passed through her. She was truly forsaken—cursed and condemned—to the hands of this brutish man and his murderous kin.

Later, Ailinn lay awake upon the furs while Thora snored on her pallet and Skallagrim tossed in his sleep. Hakon no longer occupied the hall.

Through the opening beneath the eaves, she silently viewed the stars—silvery points of light illuminating a world plunged to darkness.

Ailinn's thoughts drifted to the white Dane. How could she have been so wrong? Yet, he protected her. But then he left her.

A single tear cascaded over her cheek, followed by another and another. Truly, God *had* abandoned her. There would be no escape from Thora, or Hakon, or the inscrutable Skallagrim.

She could not think on the days that yet lay before her—however many, however few. She no longer possessed her own life. She was the chieftain's slave. By all that she could garner, he had already set the seal upon her fate.

Bereft of hope, Ailinn looked to the stars in the heavens and braced herself for the coming dawn.



Lyting lingered a time with Rurik, a short distance from Thora's *hus*.

It had taken a supreme force of will to compel his feet to move and leave the maid within. Such pain cleaved her eyes, imploring that he not abandon her there. Her look lanced straight through his heart and lodged in his soul.

Despite Skallagrim and Hakon, he vowed to win her free and shelter her beneath his protection. When he sailed from Byzantium, 'twould be with the maid of Eire.

"Do you come now, *broðir*?" Rurik asked for a second time.

Lyting dragged his attention from the direction of the *hus* and found Rurik regarding him with an inquisitive gaze. “*Nei*, I keep watch tonight.”

“I thought Audun and Magnus—” Rurik halted midsentence, comprehension breaking in his eyes.

He pressed his lips to a thoughtful line. Reaching inside his tunic, he took hold of the leather pouch and drew it forth, then slipped the strap over his head. Rurik gave over the bag with its valued contents to Lyting.

“It gladdens me to know that matters are in such capable hands.” Esteem reflected in his eyes. “*Gott kvöld, broðir*. Good night. I will see you on the morrow.”

Rurik smiled and departed, heading back along the walk toward the lodgings where his family awaited.

Lyting placed the thong and pouch around his neck, then stepped to the familiar passageway. On impulse he looked up to the starry heavens and thought of the autumn-fire maid. Then, enfolding himself in his great mantle and covering his bright hair, he melted into the shadows and took up his vigil.



In the chill of early morning, while the skies yet slumbered overhead, Ailinn hastened to keep pace with Skallagrim along the dark and timbered streets.

She knew this moment would come. Dreaded it. And now its yoke was upon her.

For three days passing she and Thora had prepared provisions for a journey—barrels of salt fish, hard-baked bread, tubs of cheese and berries. They worked long, filling skins with water and casks with ale. Skallagrim brought forth furs, seal hides, and walrus ivory from storage. He sorted, counted, and bundled. Together, he and Hakon removed the goods and foodstuffs from the hall. The time of waiting was at an end.

Ailinn braced herself as the future rushed into the present, and Skallagrim led her to her fate.

The day yawned awake and the skies paled as Ailinn and the chieftain emerged from the last cluster of houses and reached the harbor. Crossing the wharf, they continued on.

A crisp breeze played over Ailinn as she looked up. Her gaze drew to the end of the pier, then turned cold. Directly ahead waited the great serpent ship that had borne her here. The monster-headed prow gleamed with the morning's light, its grin frozen in time by the wood-carver's art.

Ailinn's stomach wrenched to think she must board the ship once more. Where now? she wondered. To what desolate, unconsecrated corner of the world would it deliver her?

She kept close to Skallagrim as they wended their way amid the activity on the dock. Men moved in a continuous flow, to and from the ship, unloading barrels and crates.

Aboard, a clutch of crewmen raised the mast, then slotted and secured it in place. Several dispersed to attach the rigging. Ailinn's steps faltered, for there, fitting a mast line to the bow, stood the Dane with star-bright hair.

Ailinn forgot to breathe, surprise overtaking her and something akin to joy.

She watched as he wiped his brow and moved to affix two more lines to the side of the ship. He looked different. More handsome, if possible, less barbarous. His mane of hair had been trimmed to shoulder length.

Heat climbed her cheeks as he raised his eyes to hers. She blamed it on the warming rays of the sun but could not explain the explosion of fire within.

Skallagrim prodded her forward, across a narrow, ridged plank and onto the vessel. Conducting her toward the bow, he chained her to the empty shield rack that ran along the outside rail and left her there.

Ailinn waited. Time and again, her attention strayed to the white Dane. She guarded her interest, fearing the chieftain's unpredictable response. Yet impulse warred with wisdom, and try though she did, she could not wholly keep her eyes from the silver warrior.

With the spar set and sail lashed in place, the men lowered the piece, bracing it above the decking on three upright supports, spaced down the center of the ship. With that complete, the chieftain relocated Ailinn to the mast, where he chained her as he had on the previous voyage.

Ailinn shifted to find a comfortable position, the boards hard beneath her, the irons weighing heavily upon her leg. She glanced out over the water, then to the gulls reeling and screaming above. Finally she returned her gaze townward and drew it along the shoreline and dock.

Ailinn stilled as she beheld a group of slavewomen there, being herded toward the ship.

She rose, buttressing herself against the mast as she recognized some among them to be maids of Eire, seized in the raid on Clonmel. She bit her lip and studied each one. At the site of Hakon to the rear of the group, her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry. With him he brought Deira and Rhiannon.

An eternity passed before her stepcousins finally boarded, but at last they came within arm's length, and crying out, the three clung to one another with fierce joy. Hakon growled to quiet the women as he shackled them together at the mast.

Ailinn wiped her tears, then gave Rhiannon's arm another squeeze and took Deira's face between her palms.

"Merciful God, I thought never to see you again." She swept a searching glance over the other captives and returned her gaze. "Do you know what has become of Lia?"

Pain weighed Deira's brow, and the light died in her eyes. Ailinn knew with surety, Lia had been sold. An aching sadness clutched at her heart.

"Was it Arabs who made her purchase?"

"*Ní hea.* 'Twas a great Norse devil," Rhiannon stated with contempt for their kind. "By now he has taken her far from this place."

Ailinn swallowed the lump that rose in her throat and said a brief prayer for gentle Lia.

While the sun still climbed the early morning skies, Skallagrim ordered for the mooring lines to be cast off and the oars set to the water.

The ship glided from the dock—an imposing sight with its high, sweeping lines and the bright-colored shields, now hung along the sides from prow to stern.

As the vessel slid across the harbor, Ailinn looked to the white Dane where he plied his strength to a long, oaken oar. Of a sudden he directed his attention past the crew and ship and back to the quayside. A brilliant smile broke over his face—a startling slash of white across sun-deepened features. Ailinn's heart leaped in its place.

Giving herself a firm mental shake, she followed his gaze to the wharf. There, a man and woman waved in farewell. Ailinn looked again. 'Twas the golden lord and the Frankish lady. They stood intimately close, their sides pressed together, each holding a dark-haired babe.

The lord trailed off his wave and lowered his hand to the lady's hip. The gesture left no doubt in Ailinn's mind. 'Twas the golden lord who was wed to the lady of Francia, not his brother.

But what of the second Frankish woman? She scanned the wharf and piers but did not see her. Ailinn puzzled that. Surely if she was the white Dane's wife, she would wish to see him away. Ailinn's brow fluttered upward. Mayhap the other lady was not bound to him, either.

She surveyed the wharf a final time, then caught herself. Why should it matter? she admonished herself. He was a Norseman. For whatever reason God ordained that their lives should continue to cross, and regardless that he seemed preferable to any of his kind, she must never forget the blood that flowed in his veins.

As the dragonship slipped through the palisaded gates, Skallagrim ordered that the great, square sail be hoisted and unfurled to the wind. Ailinn tasted the exhilaration that swept through the men, her own mounting as they coursed the wide waterway. She gave herself to the moment—the steady swell and dip of the ship; the stiff, moist breeze buffeting her cheeks and tossing her hair in a fiery dance; the creak of wood and snap of sail; the faint saltiness to the air. Above, sea-swallows followed in their wake, and along the river, beech trees leafed to a pale green, gracing their passage.

Time slipped past unmarked until hours later they gained upon the mouth of the river. A tremor passed through Ailinn as she viewed the vast sea that lay ahead. Beyond its watery domain awaited her unnamed fate.

She took a swallow against the dread that weighted her soul. Ignoring her earlier thoughts, she looked to the silver warrior. He met her gaze at once as though sensing her need. She found strength there and

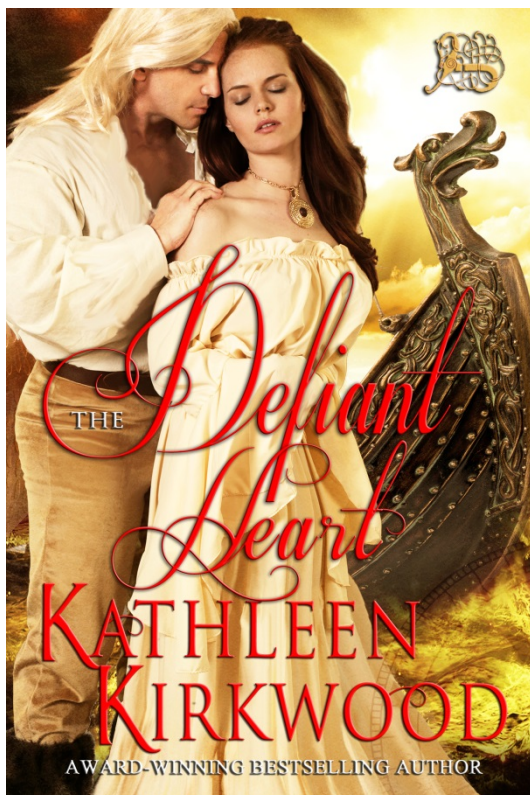
solace. The distance between them diminished, crystal blue eyes encompassing the golden-brown depths of her own.

As their gazes coupled and held fast, the *Wind Raven* passed out of the River Schlei and into the deep-blue waters of the Baltic.

End of Sample

The Story Continues!

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The Defiant Heart

by
Kathleen Kirkwood

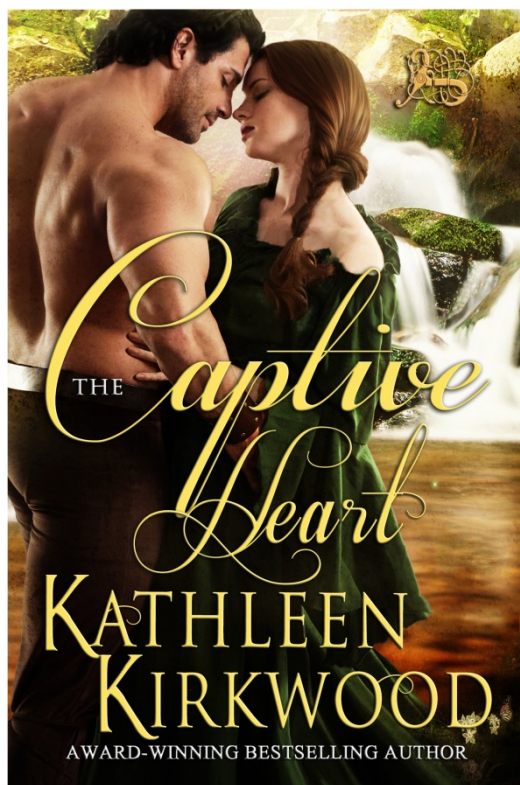
The Captive Heart

By

Anita Gordon

Writing as

Kathleen Kirkwood



Dedication

For my critique group
— never shy to share an opinion
and always generous in their support
— thank you, my friends:
Susie Brack, Dee Gordon, Christine Hyatt

And for a dear friend and the inspiration for Héricourt’s nursemaid, Felise
— Jenny Jones, bookseller extraordinaire!

Author’s Appreciation

Once again, a very special thanks to Jim Shellem for his nautical expertise.

Deepest appreciation to Suzanne Parnell for her guidance, aid, and advice on Anglo-Saxon England.

More thanks to Sand Toler for the geographical details of Ireland’s Buren and peat bogs.

For my son, Scott Gordon, who, over the Heart trilogy, has helped “stage” many of the action scenes: a heart full of gratitude.

Author’s Note

We met the Frankish king, Charles the Simple, and Normandy’s first duke, Rollo, in the pages of *THE VALIANT HEART*. Now, two decades later, both men are dead. Charles’ throne has been usurped, his young son and queen dwell in exile across the Channel at the Anglo-Saxon court, and a revolt has just been quelled against Normandy’s new duke, William Longsword.

Garreth and Ailénor’s story is woven through this time of shifting loyalties and dangerous alliances as an old adversary returns from the past. I hope you enjoy the tale!

“ . . . love knows no cost, nor faith any detriment,
and no distances on earth separate
those whom the bond of true love binds . . . ”

—Fulco
Ninth Century

Prologue

West coast of Ireland, 933 A.D.

You have found her, then?”

Rhiannon rose in a fluid movement from her highseat and slid her gaze over the two men who stood before her.

“You have seen her with your own eyes?” she pressed, anticipation welling in her breast.

“Aye, Princess.” The man with the pock-ravaged face stepped forward. “We located her as you directed, across the sea in the duchy of Normandy.”

Rhiannon smiled, her nostrils flaring as she drew a breath and sensed her triumph near at hand.

“At last.” The words hissed from her lips.

Rhiannon averted her gaze and looked with satisfaction to her well-muscled companion, Varya, who stood beside her highseat, his gold-cuffed arms crossed over his bare chest, a curved sword gleaming at his side.

She gave him a purposeful nod, then began to pace the chamber, exultation swirling through her veins.

What great fortune to have found word of her old adversary so soon upon her return to Ireland. She expected the she-dog to yet be enslaved in some distant land, conceivably dead. But according to accounts, she had lived these years past a free-woman in Normandy.

Rhiannon stayed her step and rounded abruptly, her eyes slicing back to the two hired men, Grimbold and Wimund, incising them with her gaze.

“You are sure it is her? There must be no mistake.”

“There is none,” assured Wimund, the shorter man with large bulbous eyes and receding chin. “She abides at Héricourt with her husband, the lord baron, and with their brood of children. Lady Ailinn—”

“Lady?” Rhiannon crowed a laugh. “She is no *lady*. She is naught but the lowly dropping of the Érainn, whose mother bewitched my uncle’s heart and gained a place for herself and her wretched daughter among my people. The bitch displaced me, presenting herself as my own person the morn we were seized by the Danes in their raid on Clonmel, *eighteen years past*.”

Rhiannon steadied herself, her pulses pounding as she moved to the highseat and grasped the elaborate carved back. She inhaled deeply and elevated her chin as grim memories rekindled in her breast.

“I, daughter of the *ruri ri*, Mór, princess of the Casil Eóganachts, was fouled by their hands and enslaved that day—my wedding day.”

Her jaw hardened and her choler rose.

“‘Tis *she* they should have defiled. But instead, posing as myself, she was spared their brutal hands and rutting loins. Later, during our transport to the East, I was abducted by the barbarians of the Steppe. *That* I lay upon her head as well, as I do all I suffered, including this . . .”

Rhiannon swept back the veil that partially covered her face to reveal three bloodless lines, slashing straight and parallel across her left cheek. Her mouth twisted with a hard smile as she watched the men’s predicted reaction, their eyes widening and their jaws slackening at the sight.

“Yes, look upon my scars, one gained for each attempt I made to escape those who sought to master me.”

She drew off the veil completely then, exposing dark hair with a shock of white, and upon her neck a thick, puckered line, curving from beneath her chin to back under her ear.

“This last was meant to kill me and would have, had Varya not saved me.”

Once again, Rhiannon waited on the men's reactions, which came as expected, their eyes flitting to her exotic companion and back again to the disfiguring marks that forever despoiled her beauty.

"I have suffered much because of that conniving bitch. But now I am returned," she ground out, venom saturating every word. "And I shall have my revenge."

She moved off to her highseat, her back as straight and rigid as a rod. Yet when she turned and lowered herself to the broidered cushions, a narrow smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

"'Tis why I engaged your services. And why I have further need of them still."

With a nod of her head, she bid Varya to bring forth the small, ornately carved chest he held in his hands. Then, drifting her gaze back over Grimbold and Wimund, she measured them closely as expectancy fired their eyes.

With great care she had chosen them. And while she trusted fully in their ability to carry out her dictates, she trusted them not at all where her treasure was concerned.

Presumably they knew the stories—how, upon her father's death, she had seized his riches, long hidden in an ancient, underground *souterrain*. Likely these two cutthroats hoped to gain the full of it—once they verified its existence—intending to use her as much as she intended to use them.

Rhiannon continued to gaze on them coolly. Varya would prevent any treachery attempted on their part. Meanwhile, she would bait them to her purposes. Both were familiar with the land, customs, and tongue of Francia. That assured they could travel with relative ease and gain entrance where needed. Both were unprincipled. That assured they would see her plans through without question or conscience.

She favored them with another smile. "You have done well in locating my stepcousin, and as promised, you shall enjoy a handsome reward."

At her gesture, Varya placed the chest on a narrow table beside her highseat, then repositioned it to sit between Rhiannon and the hired men.

Leaning forward, Rhiannon slid the elegant jeweled dagger from the brass fittings that secured the chest. Setting it aside, she opened the lid and reached for the leather pouch that lay within. This she held in Grimbold's and Wimund's view as she began to fill it with gleaming coins and a few sparkling jewels.

Rhiannon lifted a brow at the men's avid looks. Grimbold's was intent, while Wimund appeared ready to salivate. Her lips curved, and her hands stilled to torment them a touch further.

"Tell me. How fares my stepcousin?" she drew out the last word with unsubtle distaste, then dropped a bright sapphire into the pouch, toying, tantalizing. "Have the fires of her hair dulled with age, and her waist thickened with childbirth? I'm amazed the chit was able to produce at all."

She suppressed the mental image of Ailinn coupling with the handsome Norman lord, Lyting Atlison. Ailinn had bewitched him, Rhiannon knew. 'Twas why he had chosen Ailinn and spurned her own self, years ago, upon the banks of the Dnieper. Ailinn, the low-birthed sow, was just like her mother to bind a man so.

"In truth," Grimbold spoke with some hesitancy as he watched several more jewels slip from Rhiannon's fingers into the growing purse, "your stepcousin is much as you described her as a younger woman. The dark red of her hair is indeed an exceptional shade. She is slender enough, I'd say." He shrugged, watching Rhiannon's hand dip once more into the chest. "More comely than expected . . ."

Rhiannon retracted her hand and stood to her feet, her mood shifting, tempest-quick. Jerking the drawstrings closed, she tossed the purse at the men.

"Enough! If you find my stepcousin so appealing, then return to Normandy and seize her from her pampered perch. Pleasure yourselves upon her to your content and consider it part of your reward. But do not tarry overlong. When you deliver her to me, the remainder of this treasure shall be yours."

Rhiannon reversed the chest, turning it around to fully expose its glittering contents.

Wimund's huge eyes distended. Overcome by the vision of such wealth, he lunged forward and thrust his hand into the chest, seizing up a fistful of jewels and coins.

Instantly Varya manacled Wimund's wrist in an iron grip. Fixing Wimund with a fierce glare, he increased the pressure, threatening to snap the bone. The precious booty trickled from Wimund's hand back into the chest.

Grimbold started forward, his hand seeking the knife in his belt. But before he could take another step, Varya freed his sword and shifted his stance to block him.

“Do not think to betray me,” Rhiannon clipped out icily. “I did not survive the Steppe without guile. And take heed. Varya is an Avar. Completely loyal to me.”

The men’s eyes shifted to Varya, taking in his dusky skin, the purplish-red birthmark covering the right half of his face, and his shaved head with its long swatch of jet-black hair hanging down at the back in a tangled mass. The Avar stood to a better-than-average height, his build hard, muscular, unclad above a wide leather belt that cinctured his waist tightly, making his shoulders and chest appear all the wider. He watched them with eyes as keen as a serpent’s and as black as death.

“Tis wiser to fear him above any Norseman, I assure you.” Rhiannon’s voice broke through the men’s concentration. At her look, Varya released Wimund, though he did not resheathe his blade.

“Be certain,” she began again, “I intend for my stepcousin to pay for her misdeeds and suffer all I have suffered in her stead. When she is in my possession, the treasure shall be yours. Fail and I shall find another who won’t disappoint me.”

Rhiannon grasped the chest’s lid and slung it closed, shutting off the men’s view of the prize.

“Return now to Héricourt and bring her to me.”

Grimbold gave a curt nod, drawing Wimund back. “As you will, Princess, but we shall not take her from Héricourt.”

Rhiannon’s chin jutted upward, and she started to argue, but he stayed her with a hand.

“Tis too well garrisoned. Besides, the barons are to convene at Rouen in the coming weeks, a celebration of some order, devised around the anniversary of William Longsword’s installment as duke. All of Normandy’s noble families are to attend. With the press of people and distractions at the ducal court, it will be easier to snatch our prey right from beneath the noses of the proud Norman warriors.”

The thought roused Rhiannon. She envisioned her stepcousin’s entrapment at court. Envisioned the chit delivered into her hands at long last, then savored images of the retribution she would exact, slowly, painfully. The anticipation of it all swirled through her anew, pulsing in her veins and welling in her breast. All she had suffered, all she had lost, would soon be avenged. The triumph would be hers.

Exhilarated beyond patience, Rhiannon’s gaze swept to Grimbold and Wimund. “Why do you tarry? Be gone with you,” she snapped, suddenly annoyed by their idleness.

Snatching up the jewel-hilted dagger from the table, she gestured them away.

“Bring her to me,” she commanded with a burst of emotion, then stabbed the dagger downward into the lid of the chest, defiling its rich carvings. “Bring me Ailinn of the Érainn!”

Rouen, Normandy

Ailénor's dark red hair tumbled from her shoulders as she tipped back her head and looked straight upward into the canopy of leaves spread overhead.

High in the old pear tree, a fluffy white ball of fur clung tenaciously to a twiggy branch, its round golden eyes staring back at her as it gave a plaintive mew of distress.

"Cricket's going to fall," young Michan fretted at his sister's side and gave an anxious tug to her skirt.

Adelis, Brietta, and little Ena huddled beside him, each gasping in alarm every time the kitten lost her back footing or the bough swayed with the feline's shifting weight.

Nine-year-old Lucán stood tall and erect to Ailénor's left, his gaze fixed on the kitten, his brows drawn into the semblance of a scowl as he contemplated the animal's predicament.

"Really, Michan," Ailénor whispered. "I do think Cricket can manage. She climbed up without difficulty, did she not? And her claws are quite sharp. She will back herself down. You will see." Ailénor sent up a quick mental prayer that the kitten was bright enough to do so.

As they continued to monitor Cricket's plight, the kitten edged, bit by bit, along the branch, toward the tree's trunk. Ailénor smiled. *Minette calée*. Smart kitty, she applauded silently.

Just then, a small purple finch flitted into the tree and perched on the branch, startling the kitten. Cricket drew back and tensed, her fur spiking. She swatted at the intruder with a tiny forepaw, only to upset her own balance.

Unimpressed with the show of aggression, the bird flittered off, leaving the kitten clutching the limb, her hindquarters dangling midair.

The girls squealed fitfully, jumping about, clasping one another, and squinching their eyes shut. Ailénor's heart flipped several times over. Blessedly, Cricket regained her hold, pawing her way onto the branch with her back legs.

The furrow on Lucán's brow deepened. "I still say I can get her down. My wrist isn't that bad, Ailénor."

"Absolutely not." She glanced to his arm, immobilized with a narrow board and suspended in a linen sling at his side. "It has barely begun to mend from the spill you took from your palfrey yesterday morn."

Lucán cast her a prickly look, plainly annoyed that she should voice aloud that particular embarrassment.

Several more piercing squeals issued from the girls as the kitten misstepped, now looking for all the world ready to drop from the tree any instant. Michan whimpered and tugged afresh at Ailénor's dress, while Lucán darted her a sharp glance.

"If Galen were here, he'd have the kitten down in the wink of an eye," he said of the oldest of their brothers, younger to Ailénor by two years. "At least *he's* not afraid of heights, and he has a *man's* strength to make the climb as well."

Ailénor ignored Lucán's verbal jab at her aversion to heights and of his reproof of her gender. Lucán was at a mulish age, believing females—except their beloved *maman* and aunt—were only competent at cooking, sewing, and tending babies. Certainly not at climbing trees.

Still, Lucán's words nettled. Ailénor knew her brother provoked her apurpose, but she refused to be baited. Surely the kitten could manage the branch and then back herself safely to the ground.

Lucán gave a snort when Ailénor failed to respond.

“Girls,” he muttered. “I’m going to find Richard and Kylan. They should still be in the practice yard. Best gain their aid before Cricket drops out of the tree and splats on the ground like overripe fruit.”

Lucán emphasized his last words, giving Ailéonor a pointed, just-see-if-I’m-not-right look, then hastened back toward the practice yard where their older twin cousins were likely engaged in swordplay.

Ailéonor simmered, irritated with Lucán. But Michan’s high-pitched whine drew her attention back, as did the gasps from the girls as Cricket shifted her position once more.

Michan’s lips quivered, his eyes now brimming with tears. “She’s going to fall, Ailéonor, and bust open just like Lucán said—like ‘overripe fruit.’ Then she’ll be dead, and it will be your fault.”

“My fault?” Ailéonor blurted, taken aback.

“You could climb the tree and save her, if you weren’t so afraid.”

“Felise will know what to do,” Adelis declared in a rush, referring to their nursemaid. “We passed her in the flower garden when we came to the orchard.”

Pale with concern, Adelis grasped little Ena by the hand, and together with Brietta, their cousin, the three hurried off toward the palace gates.

Michan, watching the spasmodic attempts of the kitten, began to cry in earnest, rubbing his fists into his eyes.

Ailéonor vented a breath. Why did the little beast have to get herself stuck up in a tree? And so high? A cat *should* be able to get itself down as easily as it got itself up. But, *non*. This one would probably fall just to spite her.

As Ailéonor shot a glance up at the white fur-puff, she couldn’t help but soften. She knew she was more vexed with herself than with the kitten. ‘Twas not that she was afraid of climbing trees or too feeble to do so. She’d done that enough times as a small girl, much to her parents’ dismay. ‘Twas the height itself that frightened her so.

But as Ailéonor continued to gaze on the stranded kitten, her concern increased that the kitten might indeed fall. When Cricket stared straight at her with her perfectly round golden eyes and gave forth a small, distressed “mew,” Ailéonor’s resistance melted along with her heart. She could not abandon Cricket in such a moment of need.

Shoring up her courage, Ailéonor studied the tree to determine how best to pull herself up onto one of its lowermost branches. At the same time she engaged her mind with a constant, emboldening chatter. She was older now, she told herself, not the girl who once scaled trees without care. She would be cautious. Being overtall for a female, with long legs and a long reach, mayhap she need not climb so very high after all. Whatever was required of her, she must face. She would not have the demise of this little creature on her conscience, nor would she endure her siblings’ and cousins’ ridicule for failing the kitten in so simple a rescue.

Ailéonor pondered the lowest branch. ‘Twas a trifle high, even with the advantage of her height. Likewise, there was no place to gain footage to boost herself up. The aged pear tree reached to a remarkable height, its girth equally exceptional in width.

Ailéonor refused to be defeated so easily. Glancing about the orchard, she saw that most of the workers had already departed. ‘Twas late afternoon, the harvesting finished for the day, and near to the dinner hour. At a nearby tree, she observed one workman in the process of lugging off a basket of golden pears, his ladder left behind, still propped against the tree trunk.

Ailéonor smiled with grim determination. Mayhap this rescue would not prove so difficult after all.

“Come along, Michan, we shall save your kitty. But I shall need your ‘man’s’ strength to help me with that ladder.”

Michan palmed the wetness from his cheeks and followed Ailéonor, animated by her words.

Procuring the ladder, Ailéonor caught up the front to midsection, bearing the greater part of its weight, while Michan held the back as best he could, the end dragging.

“Hold it steady for me now,” Ailéonor instructed Michan moments later as she supported the ladder against the trunk of the pear tree.

Ailéonor looked to the kitten in the upper limbs with a bit of dismay, then lifted her foot to the first rung. Immediately she stepped into the material of her dress.

Ailéonor mumbled beneath her breath as she retrieved her foot, then glanced around to assure she and Michan were alone. Bending down, she reached through her legs, grabbed the hem of the back of her gown, and pulled the material through her legs to the front and upward. Securing the fabric in the leather cord of her girdle, she created breeches of sorts, baring her legs up to her mid thighs.

Michan stared, wide-eyed. "Ailéonor . . . What will *Pere* Bruno say?"

"Don't you dare tell anyone, Michan. Most especially not the priest. Nor *maman* or *papa*, either," she instructed sternly.

Ailéonor removed her slippers, deeming them too slippery for the task, then once again set her foot to the ladder rungs and began the climb.

Sweet Virgin, do not let anyone see me, she prayed silently. The pain across her instep reminded her that she had not partaken of such sport for a very long time.

Ailéonor spied the kitten above. Cricket had made her way along the limb to the trunk and now sat in the curve of the tree, where the two joined.

"Good, stay there," Ailéonor commanded as if the cat could understand.

Planting her foot firmly on the first branch and grabbing hold of the limb directly above it, Ailéonor pulled herself off the ladder and up into the tree. She steadied herself a moment, then stepped over and up again, onto another branch, at the same time exchanging her grasp of one limb for another.

Ailéonor found herself immediately surrounded by leaves. Leaves in her face, leaves in her eyes, leaves swatting against her mouth. She blew at them and tackled the next branch.

"I'll get you, little one," she called to the kitten, as much to calm her own nerves as she braved the climb and mounted steadily higher. "*Un moment, minette*," she prattled with forced cheerfulness, avoiding even a single glance downward. Gazing up, she saw that the little varmint had moved again.

"*Restes!* Stay put, I say!" she scolded.

Cricket gave a soft "mew," then, disregarding Ailéonor's command, tested the trunk of the tree, sinking her sharp, needlelike claws into the bark, and ventured out. Ailéonor ground her back teeth. Filled with determination, she lay hold to another branch and pulled herself up, scraping her foot in the process.

"Drratted cat," she muttered.

"Hurry, Ailéonor," Michan cried out from below as Cricket disappeared around to the back side of the tree.

A branch tore at Ailéonor's dress, and another snagged her hair. Her temper warmed as she freed herself. She had no wish to get into a chase—with a cat—in a pear tree. Where would it end? She shuddered to think, glancing to the uppermost limbs. Ailéonor continued to work her way higher, ignoring the insects she encountered and trying not to destroy any fruit.

Another "mew" told Ailéonor that Cricket was just to the opposite side of the trunk. Carefully Ailéonor made her way around, thankful for the sturdy limbs on the old tree. Gaining sight of the kitten once more, she smiled. Cricket was scarcely more than an arm's length away.

Mindful, Ailéonor held on to the branch with one hand and leaned forward, stretching out her torso and free arm to grasp the white fur-ball. But even as she did, the kitten shied from her reach. Blinking her golden eyes, the kitten gave a placid "mew," then began backing down the trunk of the tree.

Ailéonor gazed after the cat aghast. Cricket picked her way down without mishap, then, while still a third of the way above the ground, turned herself around and dashed down the remainder of the trunk. Reaching the ground, she scampered a short distance, plopped her bottom on the ground, and started lazily licking her paw as though nothing of consequence had just passed.

Ailéonor boiled, feeling as though steam issued from every pore on her head.

Squeals of delight burst from Michan, startling the kitten as he rushed with open hands to snatch her up. Cricket bolted, with Michan trotting joyfully behind, intent on capturing her. Ailéonor pressed her lips to a thin line as the two headed out of the orchard, abandoning her in the pear tree.

"Wretched little beast," she grumbled after the cat. "Both of you," she tossed after Michan as well.

Ailénor felt hot and dirty and very disagreeable, especially as she spied ants and then a leggy spider on the underside of several leaves. Pushing back wayward strands of hair from her face, she made the mistake of looking directly below.

Ailénor clutched the branch, her knuckles whitening as the ground moved beneath her. She shuddered, her heart and stomach suddenly in her mouth. She'd climbed far higher than she'd realized. All too vividly, Ailénor recalled the reason she had ceased climbing trees as a child. Likewise, she realized, 'twas not so much the height itself that terrified her, but the fear of falling. *That* she had nearly done at age five, from high in an oak tree. *Papa* climbed to her rescue in that instance, she herself a lost kitten!

Heart thumping madly and fear congealing the marrow of her bones, Ailénor began a shaky descent. "Cricket, you better have nine lives," she muttered. "You are going to need all of them when I catch up with you."



Garreth of Tamworth elongated his stride, greatly enjoying the stretch and pull of his muscles.

After having been cramped aboard a stocky little trading cog for three days, he now relished the simple act of walking, the stiffness diminishing from his joints and spine with each new exertion. He was amazed that his legs hadn't folded beneath him, knotted and benumbed, when he first set foot onto the dock.

But now, as he made his way through the twisting streets of Rouen, his muscles loosened, and the tension flowed out of them, replaced with a fresh surge of energy. He hoped his time here would meet with the same success he had just achieved in Paris.

Officially he traveled through Francia as an agent for his lord and sovereign, England's celebrated king, Athelstan. Like numerous other royal envoys currently scouring Europe and eastern lands, his task was to procure sacred relics and hallowed articles for the monarch's renowned collection.

The guise allowed him to travel inconspicuously, without garnering undue attention. Moreover, in his capacity 'twas most natural and without suspicion that while in Paris he should serve as courier and deliver greetings to the king's sister, Eadhild, and to her husband, the Count of Paris—also known as "Hugh the Great" and "Duke of the Franks."

Count or duke, Hugh also happened to be the most powerful baron in the Frankish realm.

Garreth's lips lifted into a faint smile. His mission to Paris—and now to the ducal court of Rouen—had less to do with sanctified bones than with the future of the throne of Francia.

Garreth proceeded along the narrow street, inhaling the pungent scents of the city and scanning the crowds milling there. Wattle-and-daub houses lined the way, decorated with a profusion of flowers, brightly colored pennants, and fluttery ribbons.

Clever of the duke to hold these festivities and demand his barons to be in attendance—given the events of the past months Garreth thought. 'Twas convenient for himself, as well, that he might bear King Athelstan's wishes for the duke's rule—and all he might accomplish through it.

The street wound gently upward, reminding him that Rouen spread along the foot of high, forested hills. Garreth continued to follow the meandering lane, having been assured it cut through the heart of the city and would lead him directly toward the grounds of the ducal palace.

Progressing on, his gaze paused over a particularly flirtatious maid who lingered in an open doorway. He skimmed her shapely curves, giving her an appreciative smile.

He certainly wouldn't mind a dalliance while in Rouen. It had been sore long since he enjoyed a good tumble. His visit in Paris had been too brief and too guarded to seek his pleasure in the softness of a woman. There would also be little chance to do so when he returned to England, for then he must choose a wife. Or rather, announce his choice of one.

With a sigh he gave a parting glance to the maid and pushed himself on, regretting his present mission must eclipse such indulgences for the moment.

A wife. The thought sent a prickle down the back of his neck. He held no complaint that he must betroth himself on his return, for at that time the king intended to reward his long service and friendship with handsome titles and lands, righting the wrong done him so many years past.

But being elevated from the status of royal *thegn* to the privileged rank of *ealdorman* would necessitate that he take a wife and begin seeding his own dynasty. To that end, Athelstan, king and matchmaker, who had seen all his sisters wed to high places—save the ones who had escaped to monastery—had already proffered two distant cousins for his consideration.

Garreth had jested with the king at the time that he himself should take a wife. But, in truth, he was deeply honored and flattered by the king's gesture. Not only was his admiration for his sovereign unbounded, but no more steadfast a friend, nor truer "brother"—even of blood—could he ever hope to have than Athelstan.

Still, this business of a wife. As a royal *thegn* attached to the king's household, unencumbered these years by titles and lands and the need to make an advantageous marriage, he had entertained thoughts of choosing a mate for love rather than status. Despite his lack of lands, the king had seen him amply rewarded with wealth and privileges aplenty, advancing him to a high station within the royal circle.

Garreth looked on another fetching maid who flushed under his gaze as he passed. With a small flutter of lashes, she smiled at him with a shy, pretty seductiveness.

Rosalynd and Mora, the king's kinswomen, were not so pretty, he reflected, though acceptable enough and seemingly intelligent and capable. Mayhap affection would come with time, though from his few encounters with them, he suspected he would have little in common with either one he might choose beyond the marriage bed itself. Would that suffice through the years? A corner of his mouth pulled downward. Truth be known, it left a barren feeling in his heart.

Garreth shook the thoughts away as he passed through the postern gate of the city, the street turning from cobbles to dirt. In the far distance, left and right, he could make out the continuance of the wide, yawning ditches that surrounded Rouen, said to be filled with wolf traps. Along the banks of the Seine, of course, 'twas not ditches that protected the city, but miles of barbicaned walls, a legacy, presumably, of earlier Roman endeavors.

But now the road stretched on before him, winding and climbing the hillside, cutting through a sizable orchard, and terminating before the high limestone walls of the ducal palace.

Garreth leaned into his stride as the land sloped steeply upward, warming his leg muscles. Presently he traversed the distance and approached the orchard. It looked to have been long-standing, the trees mature and healthy in size, the foliage of the pears, apples, peaches, and plums densely full.

As he neared the edge of the orchard, an amusing sight caught his eye that of a lad roughly five years of age, chasing after a small white kitten. The two trotted onto the road, dodging around an old man entering the grove—a laborer from the looks of him.

The boy and kitten scampered ahead, while the man trod on and stopped in the midst of the trees. Doffing his cap, he scratched the thin wisps of hair on his head, looking from one tree to another as though he had misplaced something. He halted his motions as he spied a ladder leaning against a trunk several trees away. With a shrug and shake of his head, he trudged over and took hold of the piece. Hooking his arm and shoulder through the rungs, he carted off the ladder and departed the orchard.

Garreth watched the man with a mixture of amusement and compassion. Obviously the old fellow's faculties were slipping.

Garreth proceeded on, his gaze lingering a moment longer on the retreating back of the orchard worker, then drifting back over to the tree.

'Twas an exceptional tree, an ancient pear, lofty in height with a stout bole, its leaves a glossy green. His stomach growled beneath his belt. As his gaze strayed over the tree, he wondered if it offered anything ripe for the plucking.

He started toward it, then halted as a long, bare, and very shapely leg appeared from the canopy of leaves.

Garreth stared in outright surprise, his boots taking root in the earth, his breath trapped in his chest. Slowly his gaze traveled over the trim foot and ankle, up the slender leg with its pleasingly rounded calf,

on to the smooth knee and what promised to be the beginning of a tempting and equally bare thigh hidden behind the foliage.

Garreth took a long, hard swallow, feeling warmth rise from his toes to flood his whole being. He watched, entranced, as the leg stretched forth and the foot began to “search” the trunk of the tree. Several captivating moments later he came to himself, realizing with a start that the object of the search was obviously the ladder that the worker had just removed.

A wide grin stole across his face, and he chuckled, humor rumbling in his chest. The old man had not only forgotten where he left his ladder, but he had forgotten his helper in the tree. Gazing on the deliciously tempting leg, he wondered somewhat wickedly where it led.

As though the owner of the leg had overheard his thoughts, the leg folded back up on itself, disappearing behind the screen of leaves.

Garreth rubbed his jaw, wholly intrigued and most thoroughly tantalized. He remained lodged in place, waiting for the leg to reappear.

It did not.

Overcome by curiosity and unable to resist, he proceeded forward to discover for himself the secret of the pear tree.

Dear Lord, be kind to your servant and let it belong to a female and not some smooth faced lad, he pleaded silently.

Garreth mounted the gentle slope to the tree with long strides. He spied a pair of ladies’ slippers discarded on the grass.

Definitely a female. His grin stretched the corners of his mouth farther, and his anticipation rose. Still, the leg remained hidden from sight. Dauntless, Garreth stepped directly beneath the spreading pear tree and peered straight upward into the canopy of leaves.

His broad smile slackened with surprise. Perched above, amid the foliage, on a smooth gray limb, sat a gorgeous nymph with fiery tresses, her long, sleek legs bare midway up her hips.

“By the Rood!” The words slipped from Garreth’s lips, followed by a low whistle.

His gaze skimmed the silken legs upward to the slim waist and full, round breasts straining the fabric of her simple work dress. His gaze then lifted to the maid’s hair, a most unusual shade—deep, rich red, mindful of the fires of autumn. The eyes gazing back at him were a crystalline blue, bordered with dark lashes. Garreth found the beauty of her delicate features to be utterly breath-stealing.

“Are you real, gentle maid?” he uttered softly, half to himself, half to the angelic vision above, fearing she might disappear in the next instant, the product of his happiest delirium.

Truly, he had been celibate far too long, for now he was entertaining fantasies. But the swelling response beneath his trousers was certainly not of any imagining.

Ailénor ceased to breathe as the dark-haired stranger appeared below her. His sheer handsomeness momentarily transfixed her. Though the light filtering through the canopy of leaves cast a dappling of shadows on him, she could see that the lines of his face were clean, straight, strong—most especially his jaw. Rich sable hair flowed to his shoulders, a shorter unruly piece curling over one brow. Ailénor’s heart raced as his dark liquid eyes embraced her.

The stranger spoke, yet she did not quite grasp his words, for his mouth held the most irreverent of smiles, totally disarming her as, once more, his gaze began to roam over her.

She wavered as those eyes touched her, wavered with a thrilling, tingling awareness and a most disturbing unease. His gaze slid over her breasts, then grazed the full length of her legs only to return along the same path, retracing every inch.

Heat shimmered through Ailénor, and her bones dissolved. She gripped the limb all the tighter.

Striving to recover herself, Ailénor realized how scandalous she must appear, perched in a tree, naked to her hips. Her cheeks grew hot, while the stranger’s lips remained spread with a wolfish grin, his dark eyes devouring her.

Garreth inclined his head. “Have you a voice, minx? A name?” he called to the exquisite creature above.

She gazed on him with large, wide eyes but did not respond.

“‘Twould seem your ladder has gone off. With the laborer, that is,” he amended.
Still the beauty did not speak.

Garreth wondered if she could understand him. He assumed her to be one of the native Frankish villeins, and thus spoke that tongue. His own efforts were heavily accented, he knew.

But mayhap she was Dane. For the greater part, ‘twas Danes who had settled Normandy and continued to do so with a steady influx of people from their homeland. Mayhap he should attempt to communicate in his native Saxon tongue. It shared the same origin as the Nordic one, their forebears belonging to the same stock of Baltic peoples. At home, Saxons and Danes communicated without great difficulty, the differences in their languages being largely ones of dialect. Mayhap he should address her in Saxon.

But considering the maid, with her fine features and dark auburn hair, he decided ‘twas more likely she was of mixed heritage, Danish and Frankish, and likely spoke the latter. Again he undertook to speak that tongue.

“Might I be of assistance?”

Understanding reflected in her eyes, but she appeared frightened and unready to trust him.

“Mayhap we should be properly introduced before an attempted rescue.” He smiled easily. “I am Garreth of Tamworth. Have you a name, minx?”

He watched her take a small swallow, her hands tightening on the branch.

“Ailénor. Of Héricourt,” she said in clear, pleasant tones.

“A lovely name, to be sure.” His smile broadened, carrying warmth to his eyes. “Well now, Ailénor of Héricourt, ‘twould appear that someone forgot you. The ladders have all been taken in for the day.” He gestured to the empty orchard. “Certainly you cannot remain there till the workers return on the morrow.”

The maid listened attentively but made no response.

“Nor should you stay there through the night. No telling what beasts or ne’er-do-wells might lurk about in the dark outside the palace walls.”

“Oh.” Her mouth rounded into a perfect “O.”

Garreth felt a jolt of desire to sample those lips and make them pliable beneath his own.

Ailénor stirred, looking appreciably disquieted by his last remark, and opened her mouth to speak.

“*Bien*. How do you propose we manage it?”

Garreth groaned inwardly, thinking of what precisely he would like to manage with this damsel, be she made of flesh or dreams.

“You are already seated upon the lowermost branch.”

Ailénor nodded, taking stock of her position.

“Concentrate here, on the center of my chest.”

Ailénor looked there. “And?”

“And . . . jump.” He lifted open arms to her.

“Jump?” Ailénor clung to the tree, her eyes rounding all the more.

Garreth caught the thread of panic racing through her voice. “Truly. I shall catch you.”

“Could you not seek out a ladder?”

“There are none, minx. And besides, it will be much quicker and easier this way.”

Ailénor looked at his chest, then at the ground, then back to his solid and oh-so-disturbingly masculine chest and his outstretched arms. She shook her head.

“I would much prefer a ladder.”

“My lady, you wound me,” Garreth avowed, chuckling, then noticed how she clutched the limb, white-knuckled, and noted the paleness of her face. Ailénor, he suspected, possessed an acute fear of heights.

“As you might have noticed, I am a rather tall fellow,” he cajoled. “The jump won’t really be so far. It appears so because, well, your head is higher than your lovely toes. Come now. There is nothing to fear. Why, if I were to leap up a mite, I could touch your feet.”

The thought of this man touching her anywhere sent a jolt of liquid fire straight through her, settling low in her abdomen. She shifted restlessly. Below, Garreth widened his open arms to her, obviously believing her ready to make the leap.

“Loose your hold of the branch now,” he called. “Give a little shove off and throw yourself at my chest.”

“Your chest,” Ailéonor repeated, staring at that broad expanse and running the tip of her tongue over her lips.

Garreth’s eyes followed the movement of her tongue over her lips, then suppressed his natural response and forced his concentration back to retrieving her safely from the tree. There would be time aplenty later to sample those lips and tongue.

He wiggled his fingers in a coaxing manner. “Now, Ailéonor. At the count of three.”

Ailéonor gulped as she looked at the proposed target of his chest. He did look sturdy and solid. Nonetheless, ‘twould likely be a hard landing.

Loose your hold and drop down,” he bid her. “Aim for my chest. One, two, thr—”

Ailéonor pressed her lashes tight and shoved herself off the branch, casting herself at her rescuer.

A “woof” left Garreth as Ailéonor caught him high on the chest, compelling him backward. Together they tumbled, his arms wrapping instantly around her as they fell.

Thudding gracelessly to the ground, Garreth found his face suddenly buried between the soft pillows of her breasts. There was no help for it, for in the same instant they began to roll, over and over, down the slope, gaining considerable momentum and coming to a stop minutes later with Garreth atop of Ailéonor, his nose and mouth still pressed intimately between her voluptuous contours.

Garreth started to raise himself, but Ailéonor clung tight and pulled him back down.

“Am I . . . alive?” She panted for breath, wholly shaken.

Garreth muffled a response between her breasts, then managed to lift himself partway. He felt the silken warmth of her flesh beneath his left hand, coming aware that that member now grasped her naked thigh, and that her leg twined about his like a lover, hooking his knee from behind.

“More than alive, from what I can tell.” Garreth gasped for air and resisted the urge to sweep his hand upward and seek her bare backside. Instead he raised himself, bracing his arms on either side of her and gazed back down on the entrancing maid.

Her dark red hair spread about her, framing her exquisite beauty. Garreth felt a pang of desire pierce him anew and feared his unruly manhood would next burst from his *braies*. He could not help but favor their position, all the parts fitting so comfortably together. He promised himself he would see that their parts did so more completely, once they found a more secluded place. He had no mind to let this minx get away.

Eyes sparkling, Garreth began to feel along Ailéonor’s arms and then her legs.

“I trust nothing is broken. Does anything hurt? Here? Or here?”

Still somewhat dazed and tingling from his familiar inspection of her, Ailéonor tried to focus on Garreth’s darkly handsome features. He chose just then to shift upward. Bringing his face away from her breasts, he propped his elbows at the sides of her head, but in so doing, his groin pressed intimately against hers.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Ailéonor gasped, her eyes flying to his face, heat shooting into her cheeks as she felt the hard bulge pressing against her abdomen—and, even more shocking, a hot, pulsing response between her legs. Before she could push him from her, a clamor rose off to the left of them—a mixture of voices and the scraping of steel. Ailéonor turned her head and glimpsed her older twin cousins, Richard and Kylan, running toward her, the children trailing behind with Felise, their nursemaid, who wore a thunderous scowl upon her face.

The twins’ swords gleamed before them, their dark brows slashing over angry eyes riveted on Garreth, who yet hovered above her, pinning her to the ground.

Ailéonor realized that Felise likewise perceived her virtue to be endangered. Felise snatched up a stick from the ground without slowing her trot, huffing indignantly as she bustled toward them.

The twins halted beside the entangled couple, their swords pointed at Garreth's back. But Felise did not stay her step and came at Garreth, amid proclamations of outrage, and switched at him vigorously. But she quickly found difficulty in doing so without smiting Ailéonor's bare legs as well. After a moment of indecision, she brought the stick down on Garreth's shoulders and head. Garreth, in turn, protected Ailéonor, shielding her with his body.

"*Cochon!* Swine! Free my lamb at once!" Felise shrielled.

"Felise, *non!*" Ailéonor cried from beneath Garreth, her lips against his throat. She shoved at him to move off her, but with their legs still entwined, they managed only to roll over together in unison.

Ailéonor quickly shifted atop Garreth, briefly smothering his face with her breasts once again. Felise continued to circle the stranger and swat at him. Hastily Ailéonor sat upright and rocked back, warding off the nursemaid with a flaying of hands, striving to knock the stick away.

Meanwhile, the parrying caused Ailéonor to shift and wriggle atop Garreth, bringing a groan from his lips. He glimpsed Ailéonor's twin protectors exchange glances as the persecution continued. Between the stings of the stick and Ailéonor's squirming upon his manhood, Garreth felt wholly tormented.

"*Non, non, Felise!*" Ailéonor nabbed the stick, then scrambled off Garreth and stumbled to her feet. "Richard. Kylan. Put down your swords," she demanded and flung the offending stick away.

Aware that Garreth had shoved to his feet behind her, she backed toward him, her arms and hands outspread defensively. Their bodies came into instant contact, and Ailéonor felt Garreth's hardness press against her backside. She jerked forward with a gasp, all word and thought deserting her tongue.

Taking in the amazed and expectant looks of the others, including Felise's disapproving gaze fixed on her bare legs, Ailéonor yanked her gown free of her girdle and fortified herself with a deep breath. Gathering her frazzled thoughts, she started to launch into an explanation, but Garreth began with his own a fraction of a moment before, so that they overspoke one another.

"I've just arrived in Rouen . . . I was walking toward the palace gates."

"He found me in the pear tree."

"The worker carried off her ladder."

"I was trying to get Michan's kitten."

"A kitten? Really?" Garreth paused, tipping his head toward Ailéonor. "Is that why . . . ?"

Ailéonor ignored his question and raised her chin, looking back at the others.

"It backed itself down, and Michan ran off . . ."

"As I was approaching, her leg appeared out of the tree . . . looking for the ladder. Well, I went to see . . ."

"And I jumped . . ."

"Well yes, such as it was." Garreth rubbed the center of his chest. "We fell . . ."

"And rolled down the slope . . . together . . ."

"That's when you came . . ."

"We hadn't recovered ourselves yet . . ."

Garreth stopped and gazed down at Ailéonor, the side of his mouth pulling into an infectious grin. "My dear minx. I doubt if I ever shall!"

Ailéonor's eyes flew to his. At the same time Richard and Kylan split with laughter, their swords sagging before them.

Felise huffed, her large bosom heaving, while the children giggled beside her, excepting Michan who had the good grace to look embarrassed for having abandoned his sister and brought this mishap upon her. Cricket, now confined in a pouch suspended from Michan's belt, contributed a repentant "mew."

Wiping the mirthful tears from their eyes, Richard and Kylan resheathed their swords with some difficulty.

"Welcome to Rouen." Richard extended a hand and arm. "I am Richard, and this is my brother Kylan."

Garreth clasped arms with Richard, then Kylan. The two young men were identical with ebony hair and steel-blue eyes. He guessed them to be about twenty.

“I am Garreth of Tamworth, *thegn* of the royal court of King Athelstan of England.”

“Athelstan,” Kylan voiced the name with a note of awe. We are indeed honored.”

“Your business then brings you to see the duke?” Richard assessed him with sharp eyes.

Garreth hesitated at that look, concerned that the purpose of his true mission might be too easily surmised.

“In truth, I visit Rouen to procure a Psalter, commissioned for the king at St. Ouen. But I do bear my lord’s greetings for your noble duke, William Longsword.”

“To that end, we may be of assistance and can arrange an audience, if you so desire,” Richard offered.

“In repayment for your kindness to Ailénor and for her damage to you,” Kylan added with some merriment as he looked to Ailénor.

Garreth raised a brow, suspecting a little boasting on the part of these two. How was it that they could so easily arrange a meeting with the duke himself? How, too, did they know Ailénor, and why their fierce protectiveness of the maid? A briery patch of jealousy sprouted in his chest as he considered just what the nature of their interest in the beauty might be.

“I assume you have access to the duke, then?” Garreth could not wholly disguise his skepticism.

Felise snorted, miffed at his disbelief. “You Saxons need to learn a few manners and show proper respect for the cousins of the Duke of Normandy,” she scolded.

“You are cousins to Duke William?” Garreth looked to Richard and Kylan in surprise.

“As is Lady Ailénor,” Felise apprised, piqued by his ignorance.

“*Lady* Ailénor?” Garreth’s glance skimmed over Ailénor’s disheveled hair, worn gown, and bare feet. “I did not realize . . .” he offered, his tone apologetic.

Garreth reproached himself. He should have suspected as much when her defenders arrived—noblemen, to be sure, and a lady’s maid. He recalled the slippers he found beneath the tree and chastised himself once more. They were fashioned of fine kid leather, obviously those of a lady. His eyes traveled to Ailénor again. Her simple gown and tousled locks did little to foster the impression of a lady.

Garreth’s look was not lost on Ailénor. She realized at once that he thought her to be a commoner until this moment. The realization put a decided spin on her feelings, and she wished ‘twas possible to simply melt into the ground and leave not a trace.

Her fingers shook as she pulled grass and leaves from her hair, all too conscious of the virile man standing beside her. What had she seen in his eyes while they lay upon the ground entangled, their bodies pressed together? Had he thought her to be some easy maid? Were his thoughts ones of seduction? Ailénor glimpsed the Saxon from the corner of her eye. Never had a man looked on her as he had, as though ready to gobble her up.

At Felise’s bidding, Ailénor quickened back to the pear tree to retrieve her slippers, then rejoined the others as they departed the orchard.

Richard and Kylan flanked Garreth and engaged him in a rousing conversation concerning the English court, causing Ailénor to trail behind the men with the children and Felise.

Once inside the palace gate, the twins directed Garreth toward the garrison quarters, while Felise escorted Ailénor and the children back toward the keep with a stern lecture on proprieties.

“What will your *maman* and *papa* say to find you so . . .so . . .compromised?” she tutted.

“Felise, please. Do not tell them,” Ailénor pleaded.

“You must remember your station, Lady Ailénor,” Felise continued with a decided sniff. “You are the daughter of the Baron and Baroness de Héricourt. Never must you disgrace your parents but always bring honor to them. *Viens, maintenant*. Come along now. We must see you out of those clothes and dressed for dinner. And look at the wreckage of your hair . . . and the stains upon your clothes.” Felise clucked her tongue as they mounted the stairs of the keep.

“*Oui*, Felise.” Ailénor sighed, then slipped a final glance in Garreth’s direction, lingering over his splendid frame a moment longer than might be considered respectable for a lady.

Without warning, Garreth turned and looked back, straight at her, sending Ailénor a huge smile and a generous wink.

Ailénor's heart skittered. She hastened to join Felise and the children, who were now disappearing through the door of the keep. As she gained the portal, she could scarce bridle her thoughts for, all too vividly, her senses overflowed with memories of the dark-haired Saxon.

Garreth finished toweling his damp hair, feeling refreshed and infinitely grateful for the bath Richard and Kylan had managed to arrange.

Dropping the towel beside the half-barrel tub, he reached for his clean *braies*, folded neatly atop his other clothes on a small three-legged stool.

Thankfully his sea chest had been delivered from the ship. His traveling clothes had proven quite thoroughly stained from his roll in the orchard.

The image of Ailénor flooded to mind. He could not help but smile as he pulled on fawn-colored *braies* and tied them about his waist. He pictured the maid as he first saw her perched amid the foliage, so stunningly beautiful. Briefly he allowed himself to relive the moment she cast herself from the tree—the sensation of her thudding against his chest, the feel of her supple body as he clasped her against his own and they rolled time and again down the incline pressed intimately together. Ailénor. He envisioned her trapped beneath him, all feminine softness and loveliness, and so utterly beguiling—an enchantress.

Garreth heard a sigh escape his lips and wrested himself back to the moment. His gaze fell upon the shirt he now held in his hand, yet he couldn't recall having taken it up.

The maid has you behaving like quite the green fellow, he chided himself mentally, humor twitching the corner of his mouth. He drew on the shirt, then reached for his tunic.

But with a will of their own, his thoughts bent back to Ailénor.

Ailénor. Such a captivating minx. He had desired a dalliance while in Francia—a “good tumble,” he had phrased it to himself while walking the streets of Rouen. He certainly hadn't expected to have one thrust upon him quite so literally or so soon.

A liquid warmth spread through Garreth's chest as he considered the autumn-fire maid. He smiled inwardly. He'd favor a good tumble with the beauty—one of a much different nature than they had so recently shared. He desired nothing more than to sweep her away to—”

He arrested his thoughts. There could be no dalliance with Ailénor. Not only was she a woman of gentle birth and noble breeding, but also she was kinswoman to Normandy's duke. That reality both frustrated him thoroughly and pleased him enormously. Frustrated him because he could not touch her. Pleased him because socially she was his equal.

Garreth regarded the tunic in his hands, a practical garment of sufficient, though not overly impressive quality. He was unsure how Ailénor might look upon him. 'Twas necessary that he present himself as a royal envoy, an agent of Athelstan's court and a man of indeterminate rank. To reveal his true station—or the one to which he would soon be elevated—could only bring suspicion upon himself and his king.

True, envoys of any kind drew suspicion in foreign lands. But a man of high rank would not be sent solely to quest for items to enhance the royal collection, be they of heaven or earth. Leastwise not without an accompanying delegation, and only for objects of considerable import.

Garreth looked again to the tunic in his hands—dark forest-green in color, unadorned about the neck and hem, with plain, close-fitting sleeves. The sleeves were not the fashionable, overlong cut, as was the current mode, so that one need push them back up over the hands, creating wrinkles of cloth above the wrist. Such indulgences, like other embellishments, would serve only to imply status.

Sorely, he wished to distinguish himself in Ailénor's eyes, but to do so by revealing himself would be a betrayal of his true mission and, thus, of his king. That he could not do. Never would he betray Athelstan.

Garreth vented a breath. He carried a sharp ache in his loins for the bewitching, untouchable maid. At least he could enjoy her presence while in Normandy. Likely he would be as hard as a rock his entire

stay—a torturous state, but one he would willingly forbear. All too soon he must leave and bind himself elsewhere.

Garreth again took firm rein of his thoughts and chided himself for his fixation on the maid. Belting his tunic, he then drew on long woolen hose, pulling each to the knee and covering the end of his *braies*. Making quick work of the cross-gartering on each leg, he then slipped into his boots and tugged them up to midcalf.

Reflecting on the past hours, Garreth deemed he had made substantial progress in little time. ‘Twas providential, indeed, to have encountered the kinsmen—and kinswoman—of the duke. Richard and Kylan disclosed that they themselves were the sons of the Baron of Valsemé, and Ailénor, the daughter of the Baron of Héricourt. Their fathers—Rurik and Lyting Atlison—were both nephews of Normandy’s first duke, Rollo, and thereby first cousins to Rollo’s son and heir, William Longsword.

Garreth pondered that. From what he understood, the brothers Atlison had served Rollo since the founding of Normandy, twenty-two years past. He could not help but wonder where their personal loyalties lay in the matter of Francia’s crown—with the exiled Carolingian or the Robertian usurpers.

Duke William himself had shifted his loyalties—something his sire had staunchly refused to do. While Rollo lived, he and his barons had steadfastly supported the throne of the Carolingians, then held in the person of Charles, called “the Simple”—the same Charles who had granted Rollo his fiefdom in Francia and created him “duke.”

Even when most other Frankish barons of the realm revolted and supplanted Charles, the Normans—along with the Aquitainians—remained faithful. But on Rollo’s death—and, soon after, that of Charles—the political landscape altered once more. The Robertians solidified their position, winning a crucial victory over the Norsemen of the Loire. The Aquitainians then swore fealty to the Robertians, soon followed by Normandy’s new duke. In pledging their oaths, they turned their shoulders on Charles’s son and rightful heir who dwelled in exile at the court of his uncle, King Athelstan.

The thought of the young Carolingian drew Garreth’s thoughts back in time once more.

At the first of the uprising, Charles’s queen and their small child, Louis, had remained in his eastern kingdom, that of Lorraine, the source of the king’s problems. Charles had unwisely shown open favoritism for their people. When he replaced his high officials with Lorrainers, his barons revolted, led by Robert, the powerful Marquis of Neustria. Aiding Robert was another mighty baron—Robert’s son-in-law, Raoul, Duke of Burgundy.

While Charles was engaged in Lorraine, Robert usurped the throne and saw himself crowned. Scarcely a year passed when Robert fell in battle against Charles at Soissons. Charles was routed in the combat, however, and the crown snatched up by Raoul.

‘Twas at this time another grasping baron broke from the others and gave challenge to all—Herbert II, Count of Vermandois, and brother-in-law to Raoul. Through deceit, he entrapped Charles and imprisoned him. Queen Eadgifu fled with four-year-old Louis across the Channel to the court of her father, King Edward.

Charles later died, immured at Peronne. That was scarcely a year after Rollo’s own death. But between the two deaths—just after Rollo’s passing—Vermandois took Charles from his prison and forced William Longsword’s allegiance.

Garreth rubbed his jaw. He guessed ‘twas at that time William took Vermandois’s daughter, Leutgarde, to wife, forming yet another bond of blood in the perfidy.

Not long after, interestingly enough, Hugh, son of the late king, Robert, also made an offer of marriage across the Channel—a move Garreth deemed infinitely wise.

Hugh himself—through his newly acquired titles as Count of Paris, Anjou, Blois, Touraine, and Marquis of Neustria—wielded, in actuality, more power than any other man in Francia, including King Raoul. Hugh had, in truth, refused the crown on his father’s death, having no desire to hold, and then need defend, a much weakened throne in a fragmented kingdom.

Gauging the political airs, Hugh shrewdly sought an alliance with none other than Athelstan, Edward’s successor and one of the most revered and well-connected sovereigns of the day. Through

marriage alliances, Athelstan was already affiliated to many of the courts and thrones of Europe. He was also now guardian of the last of the Carolingians, Louis.

Garreth opened the door of the chamber and stood in its portal looking out on the grounds of the ducal palace.

Hugh, he believed, would support Louis when the time came. His informal exchanges with the man had been most encouraging while in Paris. But the restoration of Louis would also require the support of another powerful baron—that of Duke William Longsword.

Despite his changing loyalties, he might still prove himself to be the man his father was.

Originally, Garreth knew, the Norman barons had found their new duke lacking. Not only was William dovish by nature, but also as imprudent as the late Charles. He displayed open preference for the native people of Francia, surrounding himself in court and council with Franks, replacing many of the faithful Norman warriors who had long served his father. William reaped like results as had Charles with his impolitic dealings. Earlier this year, and with few exceptions, the barons of Normandy revolted against him.

But 'twas then, in the darkest hour of crisis, that the fires of his Norse ancestors flamed to life in his breast. Heading a handful of faithful barons and their troops, William stormed out of Rouen and overwhelmed those who stood against him.

In the midst of triumph, more good news awaited. The duke's Breton mistress had given birth to a son.

The victory and the birth changed William. The dragon had awakened. He now ruled with new authority, and his barons rallied about him. Added to that, he recognized the babe, Richard, as his heir—born not of the wife pressed upon him and whose offspring would bind him eternally to Vermandois, but born of a woman of his own choosing, his mistress, Sprotta.

'Twas difficult to say where William would place his loyalties in time to come. Circumstance had driven him to pay homage to Vermandois, then Raoul. But prior to those coercions, he had supported his father in arms for the cause of the Carolingians.

Wherever his loyalties now lay, Athelstan needed to know.

'Twas why, Garreth acknowledged, that he himself now stood on Norman soil—come to test the temperature of the ducal waters.

Garreth stepped outside the chamber and considered with a wry twist of humor that 'twas lamentable Athelstan had forged no marriage ties with the house of Normandy.

'Twould reinforce his mission here as it had in Paris. But the king was depleted of sisters, and the duke was still bound to Leutgarde, whether he bedded her or not.

Closing the door behind him, he started across the courtyard. Richard and Kylan had gone ahead to make his presence known. He was to join them in the Great Hall, where the court now gathered for the evening meal. He hoped the twins would be able to arrange for an early audience with the duke, if not an informal presentation this eve.

Garreth's thoughts quickened ahead—to the duke, to the court, and to the lovely and captivating Ailénor.

A cheery warmth blossomed in his chest, and he grew impatient to see her. Sweet Ailénor the only woman to ever truly knock him from his feet.



Thoughts of Ailénor hummed in his mind as Garreth approached the palace, an impressive structure proclaiming the might and wealth of its duke. More a “tower keep” than traditional hall, it rose tall and square to a considerable height.

Garreth followed those others now converging on the hall and mounted the flight of timbered stairs leading to the entrance floor.

Upon entering the keep, he found himself on a level obviously occupied by the officers of the garrison. Many of the men whom he accompanied into the building—those of the soldiery—now

separated from the others and headed down a passage, presumably to the Lesser Hall to take their meal with their comrades.

Following Richard's instructions, Garreth climbed a second set of stairs spiraling to the upper floor. Gaining the top of the flight, he passed through a barrel-headed doorway and entered the lower end of the Great Hall.

To the left rose columns, arched over and curtained between with costly painted fabrics, screening off the main hall from the drafts and the traffic of servants at the entrance end.

To his right, servants bustled back and forth with jugs of wine and rounds of bread from the buttery and the pantry. More servers hastened to and from the passageway that lay between the service rooms and obviously led down to the kitchens and likely a storage cellar as well.

Garreth made his way through the activity toward the main body of the hall, approached through two widely spaced and undraped pillars. He glanced ahead, skimming the gathering for a glimpse of rich auburn hair.

His gaze continued to travel the room as he entered. Stepping aside from the brisk flow of traffic to complete his search, he nearly blundered into two men, standing beside the column there.

Garreth began to pardon himself, but the words stilled on his tongue as he looked more fully on them—hall servants who seemed oddly out of place, one with a pock-riddled face, the other with overly large and protruding eyes.

Neither man took notice of him, but continued to peer intently into the hall. Inexplicably disquieted by the men, Garreth looked to see if their interest might be held by the duke himself. He scanned the room—a spacious, high-raftered chamber, handsomely appointed, and crowded with brightly clad nobles and their equally resplendent ladies.

The dais stood at the far end, where the massive chair of the duke stood empty before the high table, beneath a canopy of crimson and gold.

Garreth beheld none to match the description he possessed of William Longsword. Still, the two servants continued to stare, their interest sharpened on something particular in the hall. Garreth followed their line of sight to the upper gallery that overlooked the hall. There a swath of scarlet and patch of green-blue caught his eye. A nobleman waited as his lady hurriedly joined him, settling her veil over her hair—a deep, dark, and very singular shade of red.

Ailénor. His heart leapt as his lips formed her name, yet he gave it no voice. He saw her face only a scant moment before she turned to the noble, giving her back to those below.

Garreth's eyes narrowed over the man. He was impressive in stature, tall and broad of shoulder, with striking silver-blond hair—not that of an aged man, but rather that rare Nordic white, bright and shining and whiter still where contrasted against his scarlet mantle.

The man was far from old, Garreth observed, though older than himself. To Garreth's consternation, he looked fit and vigorous and quite totally enamored of the lady who stood before him.

The man smiled warm and deep as he caught up the lady's fingers and pressed his lips to the back of her hand. Turning it over, he pressed a more intimate kiss to her palm, then her wrist, and higher still as he tugged her closer. She yielded with ease and spread her hands upon his chest. Pulling the veil from her rich auburn tresses, the noble trailed his fingertips down her spine to the small of her back, then drew her behind the pillar and out of sight.

Garreth bristled, taking a half step forward. A fusion of anger and jealousy surged through his veins, and his heart thudded hard and heavy. It pounded solidly still as Ailénor moved back into sight, plainly affected by what had transpired behind the pillar. The noble's hand remained resting at her waist, while she smoothed order back to her hair.

Garreth caught her profile then. She smiled and laughed and gave a mock scolding with her forefinger before gracing her companion with a swift kiss upon his cheek, retrieving her veil as she did. Resettling the piece, she placed her hand on the noble's arm and accompanied him across the gallery toward the stairs. Though Garreth could no longer see her face, it seemed she carried contentment in her every step.

A storm of emotion crashed through Garreth. He stood unmoving, battling against the violence. He'd not considered that Ailénor might be married. But then, at first, neither had he considered her a lady, given her state of dress and dishevelment, her unbound locks, and the very fact she had been climbing in a tree.

A brusque voice sounded beside him, jarring Garreth from his thoughts. He turned to find the head butler berating the two idle servants and ordering them off to fetch fresh casks of wine from the cellar. Unsmiling, the men moved away and followed their superior down the kitchen passage. Garreth stepped farther into the hall, his pace much slowed, his spirit dampened. Threading through the press of people, his gaze impulsively sought Ailénor and the stairs she must now be descending with her lover. Garreth spied a flight of steps rising just beyond an archway on the opposite side of the hall and beneath the gallery. 'Twas wrapped in shadows, and he could not help but wonder whether the couple lingered there.

Stabbed anew by the green horn of jealousy, he rebuked himself roundly and turned away. He had no claims on Ailénor or cause to behave thusly. 'Twas his own selfish interest and shortsightedness that led him to believe her to be a virginal maid. Quite obviously she was of marriageable age and likely wed. The man, then, would be her husband.

Or possibly her betrothed. Or, if mayhap she were already widowed, a love interest. Recalling their ease and familiarity with one another churned Garreth's blood anew. Ailénor suited neither the image of a staid widow nor, did he wish to believe, a wanton one.

Garreth pondered the puzzle of Lady Ailénor. Would she be given to climbing trees for kittens in one instant, and in the next to sharing stolen moments of passion on balconies and stairways?

Garreth dismissed his vexing thoughts. He forced the matter of Ailénor to the back of his mind and concentrated on his mission in Normandy. Restless and as irritable as a boar, he gazed out over the hall for sight of the duke. But as he did so, a scarlet mantle and one of green-blue once more caught his eye, this time near the dais. There Ailénor and her noble approached a second couple—a man with golden hair and a woman with ebony plaits flowing over her shoulders.

Garreth pressed his lashes shut and opened them again, thinking his eyes played him a trick and that he saw double again. The golden-haired warrior stood a shade taller than the other, but facially the men's features were remarkably similar. Kinsmen to be sure. Brothers, he guessed, and from their attire men of import.

His gaze returned to Ailénor's back, trailing over the creamy veil covering her hair, then downward over the luminous green-blue mantle that so thoroughly concealed her form. He found himself wishing she would turn in his direction and take note of him.

"You appear better for your bath." A hand clamped Garreth firmly on the shoulder, and he recognized Richard's cheerful voice.

"I am much indebted." Garreth met him with a smile. "Not only to be clean, but the water's heat pulled the soreness from my bones. I vow, I rolled over more fallen fruit than I'd realized and bear bruises aplenty."

Richard laughed, and as their smiles slackened, Garreth began to ask of the two noblemen where Ailénor stood. But Kylan chose that moment to appear, grinning widely, with a golden-haired maid on one arm and a raven-tressed one on the other, both beauties of exception.

"Word of your gallant rescue of the fair Ailénor has spread quickly, Garreth of Tamworth. Now all the ladies clamor to meet you." Kylan gave a mirthful wink and nodded first to one maid, then the other. "May I present to you our sisters, Marielle and Gisele."

One after the other, the maids dipped into curtsies, their gazes fluttering over him as they did.

"And this," Richard added as he retreated a pace, widening the circle for another lady to join them, "is our cousin Etainn, Ailénor's sister."

A striking maid with an incredible snowfall of hair stepped forward. Upon her gloved hand, she carried a hooded goshawk, snowy white with a sprinkling of black across its feathers. She, too, dropped into a brief curtsy, regarding Garreth with crystal blue eyes, not unlike Ailénor's.

"You saved our dear cousin?" Marielle touched his arm lightly, drawing back his interest.

“Did you truly find her in a tree?” Gisele abandoned Kylan’s arm and pressed closer. “We are all so amazed that she should climb one.”

“More, that she should *jump* from one,” Etainn added in a surprisingly low-pitched voice. She studied him closely as she stroked the bird’s chest. “Tell me, do you hawk?”

Another maid pushed eagerly into their circle. “Do tell us of the Saxon court.”

“And of His Majesty, King Athelstan .” Yet another joined them, followed by more, all wreathed in smiles.

Garreth found himself suddenly surrounded amid a bevy of court lovelies. Futilely he attempted a glance in Ailéonor’s direction to assure she was still there, but the others so engaged him, he could neither look to her nor ask his own questions of the man who held Ailéonor’s heart.

Besieged, Garreth looked helplessly to Richard and Kylan whose eyes crinkled with merriment and whose shoulders vibrated with unvoiced laughter.

“You’ve gained favor swiftly at Duke William’s court,” Richard tossed blithely.

“Best accept the burdens of fame graciously and savor them while you may.” Kylan chuckled. “Who knows what the morrow brings.”

But as the press of ladies filled Garreth’s vision and hearing, he found his thoughts filled with Ailéonor.



Ailéonor tarried in her chamber. She smoothed imaginary wrinkles from her pale gold gown, straightened the jeweled brooch securing her ivory mantle, then plucked up the disk of highly polished steel and observed herself for a hundredth time—checking her hair, eyes, teeth, and the tiny scar beneath her chin to determine if it was truly noticeable.

She released a sigh of exasperation and set the mirror aside.

By now Garreth was in the Great Hall, drawing the attentions of the court maidens. Being so compellingly handsome and virile a man, she imagined ‘twould take little time for the ladies there to lay claim to him.

The corner of Ailéonor’s mouth twisted with annoyance—annoyance with herself. She’d dallied too long. But even had she accompanied Garreth into the hall, he would have likely soon forgotten her. The court was filled with comely women, a healthy portion unmarried. Then, too, there were her cousins and sister. As much as she loved them, she oftentimes felt inadequate by comparison.

Marielle, her cousin, was utterly beautiful and possessed a treasure of golden-blond hair. Blondes, of course, were the current “ideal,” and men pursued them avidly.

On the other hand, her cousin, Gisele—though ebony-haired like her mother, Lady Brienne—was absolutely exquisite. She never wanted for suitors.

Etainn, her own sister, was exceptional—breathtaking, really, with her rare silver-white hair, the same as their father’s. With a falcon ever present on her wrist, Etainn possessed an aura of mystery and magnetism that held men enthralled. Scarcely fourteen, Etainn seemed unaware of the spell she wove over them.

Ailéonor took up the mirror again, feeling dismally inadequate to the moment. Her own hair shone of a deep, woody red—the same shade as her mother’s. Personally she loved the color and oftentimes received compliments on it. But red was red, not blond. She also had to acknowledge that there were those men who simply did not favor red hair of any kind on a woman.

Added to that, she knew herself to be overly tall, which served only to intimidate men. If she observed correctly, men preferred their women more petite and fragile, who made them feel all the more manly and protective—and fired their possessive natures as well. Unfortunately for herself, she looked men of average height straight in the eye. She could be thankful that among the full-blooded Norse who still comprised the significant portion of men in the duchy, many were on the tall side. Those she looked in the chin.

Setting aside the mirror, she released another small sigh and resigned herself. The other court ladies would undoubtedly outshine her, captivating Garreth and leaving her to roam the hall forgotten.

“My lady, are you still here?” Felise appeared in the portal of the adjoining chamber and, due to her affliction of shortsightedness, squinted to better see her charge. “The horn will soon sound for supper, and you have yet to greet your parents. Lord Lyting arrived from the Contentin just a little while past and has been with your mother. Hurry now, they wait below.”

“*Oui*, Felise. Can I tell them of Ena? Does her stomach still ache?”

“*Non*. But she is slightly warm to the touch. I bathed her with herbal waters, and she is sleeping comfortably. I will repeat the procedure in the coming hour as Lady Brienne suggested. You might tell your *maman* and *papa* that. Now best you be along.” She gestured toward the door. “And mind you take care around that Saxon wolf.”

Ailénor chuckled. Crossing to her lifelong nursemaid, she gave her an affectionate hug.

“You worry for naught, Felise. There are ladies aplenty in the hall to consume his attention. No doubt I’ve already melted from his thoughts completely.”

Ailénor tried to make light of the words, but inwardly her heart sank, believing her words to be true. She dropped her gaze away.

“But I see he has far from melted from your thoughts.” Felise drew Ailénor’s gaze back, placing a curled finger beneath her chin. “Guard your heart, child. I’d not see him bring you grief.” She emphasized her words with a stern nod of her head, but her eyes held only concern. “Now, be along with you, before the servants are stacking away the trestles once more.”

Ailénor felt her heartstrings tangle that Felise could so easily read her. She felt them tangle again at the prospect of facing Garreth. How completely he affected her.

Giving a final smoothing to her gown and adjustment to her mantle, she bid Felise good eve and departed the chamber.



Descending the stairs from the gallery, Ailénor lingered on the last step. Veiled in shadows, she directed her gaze through the arched pillars and into the hall, and scanned the vibrant sea of people collected there.

Garreth was not to be seen.

Ailénor’s pulse slipped a beat, and she felt a sting of disappointment. But only a portion of the hall was visible from the stairs. Surely he was in attendance somewhere within. Leaving the steps, she crossed the small expanse and paused at the pillars. Straightening her spine and squaring her shoulders, she entered the Great Hall.

Ailénor swept her gaze left and right. She nodded greetings to several she knew, and proceeded on, searching the room for the handsome Saxon who had so suddenly invaded her life. Ailénor halted abruptly as her gaze locked on his tall figure across the room.

As predicted, a crush of women enveloped him. His dark head and shoulders towered above theirs, even as he bent to them in ardent conversation.

If her heart had bobbed on a low tide of self-confidence before, Ailénor felt as though an anchor had just attached itself and sank it completely.

Dispirited, she moved off to seek her parents.



Garreth lifted his head, laughing congenially at one of the women’s witticisms. He took the opportunity to glance in the direction of the dais. The sight of a maiden moving toward it captured his gaze completely.

She floated like a vision through the crowd, arrayed in a gown of pale gold and a mantle of ivory, her dark red hair rippling to her hips in fiery contrast. Ailénor. Was it she? His pulse quickened. Truly it must be. For the briefest of moments, she glanced in his direction the most bewitching woman on earth.

Garreth watched as she approached the silver-blond warrior and his blue-mantled lady. As clearly as if the skies opened up and a bolt of lightning struck him straight through, he grasped the truth of the

matter. The woman who now turned toward the maid, though lovely indeed, was not Ailénor. She could only be her mother.

His spirits shot heavenward. Darting a glance to Etainn, then back to the noble with star-white hair, he marked the family resemblances. Obviously this was Etainn's and Ailénor's father, Lyting Atlison, the Baron de Héricourt.

Garreth looked on as Ailénor embraced her parents. One by one, she kissed them on both cheeks, then turned and likewise greeted the other couple. Certain the men were brothers, Garreth concluded the second couple to be none other than the Baron and Baroness de Valsemé, Ailénor's uncle and aunt.

Garreth felt buoyant and utterly the fool—albeit a happy fool for his mistake. He grinned hugely as he continued to look on Ailénor and her mother, where they stood side by side.

"I see Ailénor captures your eye, *mon ami*." Richard moved to his side. "But does she stir your humor as well?"

"You need forgive me." Garreth's smile did not flag. I seem to be seeing double in the hall tonight. Beside yourselves, and the amazing resemblance of your fathers, I mistook Ailénor's mother for herself."

"They do favor one another," Richard concurred. "But not so greatly when you observe them close together."

"Mayhap we should warn you that likenesses run strong in our families." Kylan leaned closer. "You would be surprised."

"Really?" Garreth brushed glances with Kylan but did not follow out the thought. Instead he centered his interest on Ailénor.

"She is rather tall for a woman," he mused, then realized 'twas the very reason, when he lay sprawled atop her in the orchard, they fit together so perfectly.

"A fine attribute, indeed," he murmured with a wistful smile, vaguely aware of the twins exchanging glances.



"We have sorely missed your presence at Héricourt these past months, my sweet." Lyting smiled at her. "Are you happy here at the court of Rouen?"

"*Oui, papa. Très heureuse*. Though I do miss you all hugely," she confessed.

It had been three long months since she left Héricourt and her family. A week past, her mother and siblings arrived at court in anticipation of the ducal celebrations. Disappointingly, her father did not accompany them, having been summoned to some urgency in the Contentin. Now, elated to see him and overjoyed to have her family reunited once more, Ailénor felt tears burn the back of her eyes.

Her mother hugged her gently, understanding carried in the smiling warmth of her golden-brown eyes. "You know, your sister Etainn has been pressing us to allow her to join you and Marielle."

"As does our Gisele," Brienne, her aunt, added with a light shake of her head and a sigh.

"Richard and Kylan have been keeping close watch of you two, I trust?" Rurik raised a meaningful brow.

"To a fault, Uncle." Ailénor gave a small inward laugh, remembering their swords, flashing in defense of her virtue just a short while ago. "Truly, you must not worry."

"Fathers ever worry over their daughters." Lyting smiled warmly, chiding, "Or did you not notice in recent years while you have been growing into such a lovely young woman?"

"Of course I have, *papa*." Ailénor flushed under his praise and gave a squeeze to his arm. She looked again to her mother. "*Maman* looks radiant tonight, do you not think?"

Her mother always looked beautiful, Ailénor thought, but suspected her father was responsible for the present glow in her cheeks tonight.

"And such a glorious cloak. Is it new?" Ailénor fingered the luminous cloth, exceptional in its weave and its color most rare—a stunning blue yet green in its shadows. Given to the light the colors vied—a Nordic fjord and an emerald vale.

"A gift from your father just now." Ailinn raised loving eyes to Lyting.

“The color so complements your mother’s hair, I could not resist,” he confessed. “In truth, I purchased additional cloth and ordered a second made, knowing ‘twould be equally stunning on you, Ailénor. It will be delivered to your chamber during supper.”

“*Merci, papa.* Ailénor pressed an impulsive kiss to his cheek.

The deep, mellow tones of an ivory horn sounded just then, signaling the arrival of the duke. Ailénor looked to see William Longsword and his three companions making their way toward the dais.

“I see the duke is entertaining the king’s men this eve. Burgundians, are they not?” Lyting directed his observations to his brother.

Rurik nodded grimly. “The three arrived this morn. Raoul keeps close watch of Normandy’s duke.

“As he does all those who move within the duchy.”

Ailénor detected disapproval in her father’s and uncle’s voices. At the same time the reason for Garreth’s presence in Normandy flickered through her mind.

“I see Leutgarde is still in absence from the court.” Her father’s voice disrupted her thoughts.

“Shh, love. They grow near,” Ailinn cautioned, then added, “Leutgarde summers at Bayeux.”

“And Sprota at Fecamp with the babe, Richard,” Brienne whispered with a tilt of the brow.

Listening, Ailénor found she could not help but feel sorry for Leutgarde, a pawn in the games of men. She hoped for a more agreeable marriage for herself, one like her parents or that of her aunt and uncle. Theirs were ones of great happiness.

As Duke William approached with the Burgundians, Ailénor observed a subtle stiffness pervade her father’s and uncle’s stances. Even the smiles on her mother’s and aunt’s lips seemed to cool as they presented themselves to Raoul’s men.

“Cousin,” Duke William greeted Ailénor as she dipped into a curtsy before him. A tall man with golden hair, much like her uncle’s, the duke was a passably handsome man, Ailénor believed, and though he wielded great power and authority, he was but eight and twenty years.

The Burgundians followed with greetings of their own, each bowing over the ladies’ hands, the last man, named Faron, tarrying a trifle overlong over Ailénor’s.

“The beauty of the court doth blind this eve, Duke William.” Faron measured Ailénor with undue interest.

Ailénor fought her disgust. The oily little man revulsed her, especially when his eyes slid to her breasts.

Judging him to be of less than average height, she took distinct and unrepentant pleasure in rising from her curtsy to the full of her own, and then staring back down upon him.

A trill of pipes signaled the commencement of supper. Ailénor’s heart skipped as she reclaimed her hand from the Burgundian, fearing he might insist on sharing her trencher. Mercifully, Kylan chose that moment to appear.

“I believe you promised to share a place at table with me this eve, cousin Ailénor.” He bowed graciously, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, then slipped a glance at his father.

Rurik gave a faint nod of his head, approval reflected in his eyes.

Kylan maneuvered Ailénor quickly and deftly away from the dais and escorted her toward the far side of the hall.

“You need not remove me to the kitchens to save me from the Burgundians.” Ailénor laughed, seeing they neared the entrance end.

“Was I?” Merriment laced his words.

“Were you not?”

Kylan stole a glance back toward the dais. “*Vraiment.* Ah, here now. The others hold us a place at table just ahead.”

Good for his word, their numerous siblings gathered at the next trestle, draped in a snowy white linen and set with goblets, spoons, and rounds of bread trenchers stacked at the ends. Kylan conducted her to an open space beside Richard and Marielle. At the familiar trill of the pipes, signaling the blessing, they stood with heads bowed before their places.

A moment later, benediction complete, Kylan stepped back, allowing Ailénor additional room to seat herself.

She was still settling herself when the edge of her vision caught a blur of dark forest-green. She glanced toward it and found Garreth dropping down beside her.

Ailénor started, rising off her seat in surprise. Deftly Garreth caught her elbow and drew her back down.

“Forgive me for startling you, Lady Ailénor. I did not know until this moment what your cousins were about.”

He glanced at Richard and Kylan who were chuckling to themselves, Kylan now seating himself with Gisele, to the other side of him.

Garreth returned his interest to Ailénor. “‘Twould seem they are intent on our sharing a cup and trencher this eve. If it pleases you, I know it pleases me, and I promise to be most attentive.”

He disarmed her with the most engaging of smiles, and Ailénor felt a small thrill pass through her. Swiftly it turned to a jolt as their thighs chanced to brush, recalling to Ailénor their previous, more intimate entanglements.

“Pardon,” he murmured.

“*Mais, oui.*” She gave a quick nod, her heart skipping madly. Happy as she was to sup with Garreth, she shivered at the thought of the coming hours she would share with him. It promised to be a very long meal indeed.

Servants rapidly appeared with ewers, basins, and towels. Ailénor thrust her fingers over the bowl a trifle too quickly, bumping them into Garreth’s. She began to pull back, but he caught the tips of them, then drew them into the bowl with his and held them there.

Cool, fragrant water, perfumed with rose petals, poured over their joined hands, a soothing sensation of silken liquid over warm skin. A fragile pink petal caught between their fingers.

Releasing his hold of Ailénor, Garreth captured the fragile treasure on a fingertip and lay it in the palm of her hand, gifting her with it. Ailénor sucked in her breath as his fingertip pulled away, grazing the sensitive flesh of her palm. She avoided his gaze altogether and reached for the towel on the server’s arm, her palm still tingling. A very long meal indeed!

Additional servants appeared to fill the goblets with spiced wine and distribute the trenchers of day-old bread along the table, one to each couple.

“You look greatly changed since last I saw you,” Garreth commented, a smile tilting his lips. “I can only wonder if you possess as many bruises as I.”

Ailénor warmed under his admiring gaze and thought of a few unmentionable places where she did have bruises. She began to reply, but at that precise moment another pair of cousins, Brand and Delling, installed themselves nearby.

Garreth’s brows shot upward. Two golden-haired men, possessing identical features and appearing only slightly younger than Richard and Kylan, regarded him closely. In coloring and countenance, they greatly favored Marielle.

Laughter rippled along the table.

“We tried to warn you,” Kylan reminded. “And there are more still.”

“More?” Garreth voiced with amazement.

“Aimery and Tyr,” Richard supplied. “But they are not present tonight. They are at Ivry where they are in fosterage to the castellan, Ketil, and his wife Aleth.”

“Our father begat his sons in sets of two, and the girls singly,” Kylan added blithely.

“Mind you, our uncle begat nearly as many children, doing so one by one,” Brand added in a rich voice.

“But never was he known to complain,” Delling rejoined with devilish good humor and brought a gasped response from the ladies.

Garreth glanced the length of the table in both directions and, noting the marked similarities there, realized that he and Ailénor would be sharing their trencher under the scrutiny of nearly her entire combined family.

Ailénor's cousins quickly caught him up in introductions. Brand and Delling proved second oldest to Richard and Kylan. Next came Marielle, then Gisele, both of whom he had already met. The other set of twins, Aimery and Tyr, as explained, were in absence. The youngest daughters, Brietta and baby Linette, took their meal in an upper chamber with their nursemaid.

Ailénor next presented her side of the family, directing his attention to where Etainn sat, her hawk resting on a perch behind her. Beside Etainn sat Galen, their brother, who bore the same striking silver-white hair as Etainn. Galen, Ailénor informed, was eldest after she herself. Farther down the table sat her younger brothers—Brenden, Lucán, and Michan, who seemed occupied trying to quiet faint mewling sounds coming from beneath the table.

"My sister Adelis is sleeping with Brietta tonight," Ailénor continued. "You will most often find them together, hand in hand, for they are the best of friends. The littlest, Ena, is not feeling well and stays with Felise upstairs. I believe you met most of the younger ones in the orchard today."

"So I did." *And the aggressive nursemaid as well*, Garreth thought to himself. "An impressive family."

"And you?"

"I have none."

"No family? None at all?" Ailénor's brows twinged upward.

"My parents and sister died some years past." Garreth diverted his gaze. He wouldn't mention his half siblings or the stepmother who had cheated him out of his titles and lands.

The pipes sounded once more, signaling the first course. Servers bore great platters from the kitchens, parading through the hall to first present them at the high table. Meanwhile, butlers reappeared to top off the goblets with more wine.

Supper commenced, each course announced with a trill of notes. Being the last meal of the day, it proved of lighter fare and fewer courses. Still, meat and fowl were served in variety, some sauced, some in pasties. Added to this were leek and onion dishes, eel, a vegetable pottage, fresh bread, and a compote of walnuts and pears pickled in honey.

Ailénor found Garreth proved most attentive, selecting choice morsels of meat, offering her their goblet before he drank, and entertaining her with a steady stream of light repartee. In truth, the banter that passed up and down the table made the entire meal seem a great family occasion, as those often shared at Héricourt and Valsemé—one that easily embraced the Saxon, who was, for all purposes, yet a stranger.

As evening deepened and their conversations took diverse paths, Ailénor came to realize that despite being surrounded by her beautiful sister and cousins, Garreth's interest remained concentrated upon her own self. This pleased her immensely. And caused her to tremble like a custard, acutely self-conscious and so very aware of the potent man beside her.

Garreth's eyes traveled to Ailénor for an endless time this night. He steeled himself when she suddenly bent to retrieve a fallen napkin, causing the neckline of her dress to drop slightly away from her breasts, allowing him a most tantalizing glimpse of cleavage. Garreth drew a stabilizing breath.

Ailénor looked up just then, her eyes colliding with his. She began to straighten, but he didn't withdraw his gaze.

"I cannot imagine how such a beautiful maid could escape the marital knot without being bound in one before now," Garreth remarked, their eyes still locked.

Ailénor stilled, astonished by his words, and at the same time mindful the others watched them. Judging from his tone, she believed he meant to flatter her, that his words were meant as no insult or to emphasize the fact that she was yet unmarried. Still, lost in his liquid brown gaze, she could scarce form a response.

Richard came to her rescue. "Our fathers are Danish by birth and, though protective of all their women, hold to the customs of the North. There, women are given a voice in the choice of a husband."

Garreth blinked in surprise. "Women may accept or refuse their suitors?"

The others nodded along the table.

Turning back to Ailéonor, a teasing grin stole up to his eyes. “And did you refuse all your suitors? Or have you a husband or a betrothed lurking somewhere?” He plucked up the tablecloth sportively and pretended to look beneath.

“*Non*. No husband.” Ailéonor whisked the cloth from his fingers with an admonishing look, wondering if he sought a glimpse of ankle. “Or betrothed. There have been suitors, of course,” she added quickly lest he think her wanting in some wise.

“Of course.” He grinned.

“And offers for my hand.”

“I am not at all surprised.” He waited a moment, but she held silent. “Might I ask what became of them?”

“Well, the first died on campaign of . . . well, of . . .” She cleared her throat. “*Dysenterie*.” She reached for the goblet and took a quick sip of wine.

“Dysentery.” Garreth coughed into his hand. “Tragic. Many a good man has succumbed to the disease.”

Ailéonor saw that he shook his head with compassion, yet somehow he did not appear in the least bit remorseful for the man’s plight. She lifted her chin and continued.

“The second died during an engagement against Flanders.”

“He died in battle?”

She nodded, nibbling her lip, then cleared her throat once more. “He fell from his horse, and the beast took an arrow and fell atop him. Well . . .” She waved the remembered accounts of that event away with her hand and took up the goblet once more.

“The horse fell . . . I see.” Garreth considered her words. “Normans battle mounted—to advantage and disadvantage.”

He caught Brand’s and Delling’s look. They were grinning as irreverently as were Richard and Kylan.

He glanced back to Ailéonor. “Were there others?”

She hesitated a moment. “Actually, after having lost two prospective husbands, I thought mayhap the Good Lord meant for me to serve him as a religious. My family agreed that I go to the monastery of Levroux. Only we found I am not well suited for the religious life either.”

Garreth tipped his head, intrigued. “And why was that, minx? Did the abbess catch you in her tree?”

Ailéonor’s eyes swung to his, and she found him grinning with that heart-quickenning smile of his. She smiled, too. In truth, until that moment she had quite forgotten her reasons for leaving Levroux. But now recalling them, she knew there was no way she could confess them and risk his reaction or that of her many kindred who listened so intently at the table.

Certes. She was *not* well suited to the rigors of monastic life and the discipline required. But her shortcomings had been more than ones of tardiness at services or woefully wandering thoughts during prayer.

Increasingly there had come upon her a strong sense of fate, of destiny. A destiny that lay heavily upon her heart, bidding her beyond the convent walls.

Then, too, there followed vivid, recurring dreams, possessing an eerie realism. Dreams of a man who swept into her life and changed it forevermore. She could never quite see his face. Still, the feeling, the strong pull to leave, remained until it became so overpowering that she finally succumbed and returned home.

No sooner there, word came that Marielle wished to join her brothers, Richard and Kylan, at the ducal court. Ailéonor’s parents encouraged her to join her cousin for a change, and so she did.

Coming back to herself, Ailéonor found Garreth still waiting for her reply. She gazed on him pensively, through new eyes, a fluttery feeling building in her stomach and rising to her chest.

She groped for his question. He had wondered why she left the monastery.

“The Lord directs our paths, Garreth, wherever they lead. ‘Twould seem, for now, mine leads to Rouen,”

“As doth mine.”

Garreth's smile eased to a more sober look, his dark eyes reflecting something she could not name, but which caused her to flush with warmth.

His smile returned, slowly lifting the corners of his mouth. "And to good purpose this day, I deem. Should ever you be in need of rescuing again, my fair Ailénor, I promise to come promptly to your assistance."

Holding her gaze, he took up the goblet they shared, then, turning it round, sipped from the very place her lips had just touched.



Rurik drew on his goblet as he listened to a congenial dispute among the duke and the Burgundians as to whether elephants' legs were jointless or not.

Knowing Lyting and Ailinn had once seen one in Constantinople, he turned to his left to ask them of it. He found Lyting engrossed, staring across the hall, his interest fixed on Ailénor and the dark-haired Saxon.

"His name is Garreth of Tamworth." Rurik leaned slightly forward, speaking across Ailinn. "Richard and Kylan say he is a *thegn* of King Athelstan, a royal agent purchasing relics and holy objects in Francia."

"Do you believe that?" Lyting took a swallow of ale, not taking his eyes from the couple.

"I am not certain. Richard and Kylan say he also bears his king's greetings to the duke. Anywise, they perceive no threat."

"Do our guests know of his presence?" Lyting indicated with a tip of his head toward the Burgundians, where they now rose with the duke and began to move from the dais.

"*Nei*. William is informed but thought not to bring attention to the Saxon while the king's hawks circle. Best see what he is about first. For the present, Richard and Kylan keep close watch of him. His visit here could be as he says. I dispatched a messenger to St. Ouen. The monks have, indeed, a completed Psalter in readiness, commissioned by the English monarch."

"What do you know of these *thegns* of the royal household?" Lyting brought his eyes from the couple to Rurik's.

"Only that they are nobly born and of diverse ranks."

Lyting's gaze returned to the hall. "Garreth of Tamworth does not look like a mere '*hall-thegn*' to my eyes. He has too much presence about him."

Ailinn, who sat between the two men listening silently, smiled at this last and laid her hand to her husband's arm. "You look so grim, my darling. Do you fear the Saxon's mission here is to carry off our daughter as well?"

Lyting darted Ailinn a quick, stormy look. She burst into laughter and placed her hand to his chest. "Do not worry, my love. After all, they are more than well chaperoned. What maid could enjoy even the slightest flirtation with such a brood hovering?"

Seeing that Lyting appeared yet unswayed, Ailinn patted his hand. "Well, you continue your watch, but I must slip upstairs to check on Ena's fever."

"I shall join you." Brienne rose from her chair. "Ena was playing with Brietta and Adelis earlier. I need to check on them and Linette as well."

Taking leave of Rurik, Brienne caressed his arm with her fingers, which he promptly covered with his own hand and gave a gentle squeeze.

"I'll watch over Lyting while you ladies are gone." Rurik grinned, giving Brienne a spirited wink. His eyes fell to a spot on her gown as she began to move off.

"*Astin min*. You have stained your dress," he called after her. She stopped and examined the front of her skirt. "Mayhap I should have fed you," he teased.

Brienne glanced up and caught Rurik's look. "Later . . ." She gave a wink back to him, a bright smile breaking over her face.

Brienne joined Ailinn, and they made their way across the hall, discussing the best method to remove mustard sauce from fabric. As they passed beneath the arched columns, leading to the stairs,

Ailinn's gaze hesitated over a man standing a short distance away—a man with huge, bulbous eyes. Slowly he shifted the cask of wine from his shoulder and set it down. His great eyes continued to follow her.

A chill spilled down Ailinn's spine as she ascended the stairs with Brienne. Feeling his gaze continue to bore into her, she slowed her step, then stayed it altogether. Pivoting in place, she tossed her glance back down.

The man was gone. As was the cask.

"Is something amiss?" Brienne halted on the step above her and followed the direction of her gaze.

Ailinn's brows gathered together as she scanned the vacant space below. Had her imagination run wholly rampant?

"*Non*. Naught is amiss." Ailinn dismissed the incident, not wishing to concern Brienne.

Turning, she followed her up the stairs, but a wintry cold spread through her bones.



Descending the stairs, Ailinn thought to herself how precious the children looked asleep. Ena rested cool and comfortable now, and Adelis and Brietta shared a pallet. The two should have been twins.

Brienne remained in her chamber, treating the stain on her gown, but she bid Ailinn to go ahead and rejoin their husbands. She would be down momentarily.

Ailinn roused from her musing, a hushed voice catching her ear. She thought it spoke in the Gaelic tongue of her native homeland.

Halting at the bottom of the shadowy stairs, she glanced about only to find herself alone. She then looked toward the hall, through the portal, where the meal had ended and the tables were being disassembled.

A scraping sound brought her gaze back. She turned toward it, to behind the staircase. There, wrapped in deep shadows, a servant bent, stacking a dismantled trestle against the wall. It struck her as odd, yet she abandoned the thought as the servant moved into the torchlight, revealing a pock-ravaged face.

Ailinn stilled. His eyes burned into hers, then traveled past her shoulder. She heard a soft scuffing of shoes from behind. Slowly she turned, her stomach fisting into a knot. A second man stood behind her, bearing another trestle from the hall—the man with the huge, protruding eyes.

A cold rush swept through her. She glanced from one to the other. Their eyes seemed to fix on her, intent and filled with purpose.

The man with the trestle started toward her. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the other coming forward from behind the stairs as well.

A small sound escaped Ailinn as the space shrank between them. She dropped back a pace, her retreat abruptly halted as her heel hit the step behind her.

Ailinn's breath left her, and her legs threatened to go to liquid as the men continued their approach. She wondered wildly if her mind played her false. Servants stalking her? Why?

She lifted her foot, backing up one step, then another, clumsily catching her gown with her heel and hearing the fabric tear. She cared not at all.

Her pulse points throbbed fiercely as she watched the men close in on her. Ailinn fought a sudden light-headedness, as inky spots danced to life, speckling her vision. She couldn't breathe.

"*Elskan mín?* There you are." Lyting's voice broke through the haze enveloping her. He appeared in the archway, accompanied by Rurik.

Ailinn's eyes leapt to him as he came forward, the servants no longer there. She looked to the side and found them stacking the trestle with the other, behind the stairs.

Ailinn rushed down the few steps to the security of Lyting and slipped her arms about him. Just then Brienne appeared on the stairs above and began her descent.

"*Elskan mín*, your hands are as ice." Lyting covered hers with his own and began rubbing heat into them. "I shall have to warm you thoroughly, I see," he teased, then noted the distress in her face. "Does something disturb you, my heart?"

Seeing the servants move harmlessly away in the direction of the hall for more trestles, Ailinn thought she must be unsound to have imagined they were stalking her.

“I . . . *Non. C’est bien, mon amour.* I am fine. Though I could do with some fresh air, I think.”

“An inspired suggestion,” Rurik interjected, seeing Lyting pause and glance back through the portal. “Lyting could use a walk himself, to take his mind from Ailénor. At the moment, she is playing a game of *merles* with the Saxon. Lyting has been stewing that their heads are too close over the board. It matters not at all that her siblings and cousins still surround them.”

Brienne joined them, coming to Rurik’s side, amused by his words. “A walk sounds like a splendid idea. I can think of a few good reasons of my own.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

Rurik grinned, knowing she thought of their evening strolls at Valsemé, many often ending most enjoyably at their secluded lake.

As they followed Lyting and Ailinn toward the hall’s entrance, Rurik skimmed a final glance back toward the stairs. Something nettled at the edges of his mind. He could not recall ever seeing trestles stacked behind the staircase. Mayhap ‘twas temporary. With the ducal celebrations about to officially commence, the keep burgeoned with guests. Additional tables crowded the halls. ‘Twas likely storage space was scarce.

Still . . . Trestles stored behind the hall’s stairs? Rurik could not banish a nagging apprehension that continued to climb through his senses.

“Come, my love.” Brienne slipped her arm through his. “We have yet to discover whether the duke secretes a lake on these grounds. ‘Twould be regrettable if there is none.

Rurik smiled into her eyes as he escorted her through the entrance portal. “All the more reason to take our leave as soon as we may and repair to Valsemé.”



Wimund and Grimbold emerged from the shadows of the alcove, watching the foursome depart.

“We nearly had her,” Wimund grouched.

“Do not worry. She cannot have people about her all the time. There will be a better moment.”

Wimund’s lips spread to a grin over stained teeth. “A better moment and time aplenty to have our sport on her. Time aplenty to deliver her to the ‘princess.’

“Patience,” Grimbold counseled. “She shall yet be ours. Count on it.”

Garreth stood watching the Normans in the practice yard, intent on their methods of training.

Earlier, Lord Rurik demonstrated varied stratagems with spears. One particular feat—catching the weapon in flight and returning it without pause—left Garreth in total awe.

Now, as the Normans exercised their blades, his own hand itched to take up a length of steel and test his skill against them. Regrettably, he could not. To do so would reveal himself as a man of the sword and belie his purpose here.

Instead he directed his interest to the adjacent field where mounted soldiers—*chevaliers*—drilled with horses and sundry equipment. The Frankish penchant for mounted warfare ever fascinated Garreth. In England a man rode to battle but dismounted for the engagement itself. In Francia a *chevalier* remained horsed, the man and the beast becoming a single fighting unit in combat.

Surveying the field, he saw, to one side, that the younger aspiring *chevaliers* practiced with wooden horses. These they mounted without use of their hands—first unarmed, then burdened with shields and swords and, at times, long poles. The more proficient took turns leaping on and off the timbered forms from diverse directions—right, left, and from the rear. Only the most advanced worked with the live animals, vaulting into the saddles without touching the stirrups and with their blades drawn.

In the far right quadrant of the field, Garreth observed horsemen drill with lances, casting them at targets like spears, stabbing groundward to run through stuffed sacks, and charging straw opponents on wooden horses at speed, thrusting upward at the last moment to unsaddle their “foe.”

Garreth rubbed his jaw, impressed, then became aware of Richard’s approach.

One side of Richard’s mouth kicked into a smile as he nodded toward the far field. “Would you care to test your skill with the lance?”

“And risk making a fool of myself? Nay, I think not.” Garreth gave a small laugh, but wondered that Richard should think to make the suggestion for thus far he had presented himself to be no more than a royal collector of hallowed bones and sacred antiquities.

A slip of the tongue? A snare, perchance? Might Richard suspect his true station? Or did he simply offer genial conversation in a spirit of friendship?

Garreth chose to redirect matters.

“Tis said the duke stables the finest horseflesh in Francia. I would favor seeing the famed *destriers* of Normandy. ‘Tis my understanding the warhorses are bred for size and trained in specific war maneuvers.”

“That they are,” Richard returned with pride. “The stallions have already been put through their paces this morn, but if it interests you, we can visit the stables. Come.”

Together the two men headed back in the direction of the keep, passing near the archery range as they went. There Lord Lyting and his son, Galen, sharpened their skills with bows and arrows.

“You might enjoy this.” Richard slowed his pace and came to a halt. “Galen grows better by the day, and my uncle’s renown as an archer is excelled only by his repute as a seaman.”

Garreth directed a glance to Richard at the last of his comment, but looked back in time to see Galen’s arrow streak to the target and pierce dead center.

Lord Lyting stepped to his son’s side, smiling, and bestowed his praise. For a moment their silver-blond heads bent together, discussing some point of bowmanship. Lyting then nocked an arrow, gestured to the one embedded in the target, and appeared to explain an aiming technique.

Galen stepped away as Lyting took up his stance. Drawing smoothly back on the string, Lyting anchored his aim, released, and, with a blur of wood and feathers, split the shaft of Galen’s arrow in two.

Garreth's jaw dropped. Galen, for his part, only shook his head and grinned at his father, obviously having witnessed his sire's extraordinary skill many a time before.

Father and son launched into another discussion as they strode to the target and inspected the hit, unmindful of their spectators.

"He is called *Skarp-Øje*, 'Sharp-eye,'" Richard explained as he bid Garreth on.

Garreth fell into an easy stride beside him. "You say his ability as a seaman surpasses his mastery as an archer?"

"Upon the waters, he is known as '*Sjorefurinn*,' the 'Sea Fox.' Lady Ailinn renders the best version of the tale that gained him that title. You might seek her out and ask her of it."

Garreth nodded thoughtfully, then his lips pulled into a smile, and he gave a shake of his head. "From what I beheld earlier of Lord Rurik's prowess with spears, and now that of Lord Lyting's with a bow and arrow, I vow I hold no desire to ever offend the brothers Atlison. Od's blood, I cringe to think what they must wreak with a sword."

Richard chuckled. "From one who *has* crossed steel with them in the practice yard, I would say the word 'cringe' is well put."

As they closed upon the stable complex, Richard pointed out the various structures that housed a broad collection of horses from coursers, pacing horses, and trotters to rouncies, hobbies, and packhorses. The war stallions occupied a building of their own, while the brood mares were segregated in a separate enclosure, partitioned with sturdy palings to forestall any untimely visits from overly zealous males.

Garreth's gaze alighted on a stable lad drawing open the gate to the mare enclosure. In the next instant a sight greeted his eyes that set his heart to racing—Ailéonor riding atop a splendid golden courser, leading her brothers Brenden and Lucán out of the compound.

Seeing him, she smiled brightly and waved but did not slow her steed. Instead she reined the horse to the right and touched its flank, setting it to a light gallop as she conducted her brothers in the direction of the practice field and the palace gate beyond.

Garreth watched enrapt, unable to pull his eyes from her, nor possessing a desire to do so. 'Twas exhilarating simply to watch her for she moved with supreme grace and fluidity, one with the creature in glorious abandon.

The mare's legs reached out, slender and swift. The breeze its passage stirred lifted its pale mane and tail on the wind, as it did Ailéonor's rich auburn tresses to flow out behind her.

Garreth's heart caught in his soul, and he recognized in that moment that he wanted her to remain in his life—for now and for all time.

"I thought 'twas the *destriers* that interested you," Richard said in a voice filled with levity as he matched the direction of Garreth's gaze.

"*Destriers*. Aye." Try as he might, Garreth could scarce form a coherent thought apart from Ailéonor. "'Tis unusual she rides a courser, is it not? I mean, 'tis a large animal for a woman, though she sits it well."

"Do not be concerned. Ailéonor is an excellent horsewoman. My uncle breeds horses of all manner at Héricourt, including *destriers*. He took Ailéonor up in the saddle since she was a mite. Nowadays she requires a sizable mount due to her height and the length of her legs. Wouldn't want her slippers to drag on the ground riding a palfrey," Richard jested.

The memory of Ailéonor's long silken legs, entwined about his in the orchard, flashed through Garreth's mind and sent a hot jolt to his loins. He cleared his throat.

"From what you have told me, I would have thought Lord Lyting would be more involved in sea ventures than horse breeding."

"He is, in part," Richard allowed. "He designs ships for my father, who maintains a number of vessels that trade regularly with England—from such places as Jórvík, Lindum, and Lundenburh. Now that the Contentin is part of Normandy, he is more preoccupied with improving the duchy's stock of warhorses. My uncle foresees the region as a prime place to raise *destriers*. Its limestone plains will produce horses of strength and size."

Garreth knew the Contentin, along with the Avranchin, was a recent “gift” from King Raoul. The price of Norman fealty? he wondered, but did not dwell on it, giving his attention to Ailéonor instead.

Beside him, Richard continued to remark upon Lord Lyting’s experiments with crossbreeding, disclosing how his uncle had recently acquired a Barb from Spain to put to Héricourt’s mares.

But Garreth only half heard, his concentration so absorbed with Ailéonor. Disparate thoughts collided in his brain, rapidly realigning themselves and broaching a course he had yet to consider.

As Garreth faced the truth of his heart and the future that stretched before him, he knew, with sudden, pulse-pounding clarity, all he must do and the inexpressible rightness of it.

His decision made, he felt invigorated, awash with joy and brimming with purpose. Just when his heart was like to burst with excitement, Kylan’s voice broke through his thoughts.

“Good news, Garreth!” Kylan bellowed as he approached. “Duke William will grant you an audience this coming hour. My father will meet you on the steps of the keep and accompany you to the ducal council chamber.”

Heartened by this news, Garreth cast a last, longing look at Ailéonor as she passed through the gate on her gilded steed.

He must collect himself, he knew—fulfill his mission and bring it to conclusion. Mayhap he could remain in Rouen an additional day or two, but then he must carry his accounts back to Athelstan and have done with his shaded involvement in the matters of the Frankish throne.

Once in England, he would need delay committing himself to a bride and explain his intentions to the king—tactfully and without offense to the sovereign’s kinswomen. Then, upon the conferral of his new titles and lands, he would return to Francia, present himself to Ailéonor and her family, and offer for her hand in marriage.

Ideas sprinting through his mind, Garreth took leave of the twins and strode back toward his chamber to prepare for his meeting with Duke William Longsword.



Lord Rurik conducted Garreth to the upper portion of the tower keep and proceeded to a massive oak door, banded with iron and flanked by two men-at-arms.

Acknowledging the Baron de Valsemé, the guards moved promptly to open the heavy door, obviously expecting the two men.

The council chamber proved stark in comparison to the Great Hall below, Garreth thought. Lime-washed walls glared at him, white and naked. Directly opposite stood the duke’s imposing highseat, positioned at the head of a row of simpler, low-backed chairs that faced one another in two strict lines. In a far corner squatted a brass brazier, unlit in this warm season, and against the wall, beside the entrance portal, sat a small service table holding a tray of fruits and a glazed pitcher of wine.

Garreth’s gaze traveled across the chamber to the room’s single window. There stood William Longsword, Count of Rouen, Duke of Normandy.

He turned at their entry, one arm still bent behind his back, the other half raised, a goblet in hand. Garreth had seen Duke William at a distance last night, but now, viewing him in close proximity, he realized the man to be younger than he’d guessed, younger than even himself.

Their eyes met, and Garreth felt the duke’s needle-sharp scrutiny. It lasted but an instant, then William’s countenance altered. The crease between his brows dissolved, and his mouth eased into the semblance of a smile.

“Ah, the Saxon who saved our dear Ailéonor from her plight in the pear tree—Athelstan’s *thegn*.”

“Garreth of Tamworth, Your Grace.” Garreth gave a short bow from the waist.

“Tamworth.” William considered that, coming forward partway across the room. “King Athelstan grew to manhood at Tamworth, I am told, raised up by his aunt, the famed ‘Lady of the Mercians.’”

“Aye, Your Grace. Athelflaed was King Edward’s sister and wife to Athelred, Lord of Mercia. Truly a remarkable woman.

“‘Remarkable?’” William choked out. “I understand she was utterly formidable. Fierce as a griffin!”

Garreth repressed the smile that threatened to curl the corners of his mouth at the accuracy of that statement.

William downed a mouthful of wine and regarded Garreth with a close, penetrating look. "You also were raised and schooled at Tamworth, were you not? You must have known Athelstan when he was yet an *atheling*, a prince."

"Aye." Garreth shielded his surprise at William's knowledge, instantly wary.

"Interesting." William tapped a thoughtful finger on the side of his goblet. "You are Mercian, then?"

"At heart," Garreth allowed, deflecting the query for it riddled deep into his soul.

In truth, his father had been a Kentish nobleman—the *heah gerefa*, high reeve of Aylesbury—his mother, a Mercian lady who once attended Athelflaed herself. Garreth's mother died soon after he had been placed in fosterage at Tamworth. In time his father remarried and begat other sons. Who could have foreseen the events to follow?

Upon his father's death, the second wife contested the validity of her husband's first marriage and, with the support of her powerful Kentish kinsmen, successfully seized her late husband's estates and titles for her own offspring, disclaiming Garreth.

Inflamed by the deceit of the woman and the injustice of the Kentmen, and disdaining the assault upon her former lady-in-waiting, Athelflaed sheltered young Garreth beneath her wing, refusing to return him to Kent and providing for him from her own coffers when his stepmother would not.

Aye, a true griffiness was Athelflaed, Garreth reminisced—part eagle, part lioness—furiously protective and ready to deliver a swift, sharp justice to anyone deserving of it. Athelflaed's power did not extend to Kent, however, and she could do naught to help him regain his rightful lands.

"Mercian at heart," William echoed Garreth's evasive words, then folded them to mind. "And how fares your lord, Athelstan?"

"He enjoys robust health, and prays the Duke of Normandy does as well."

"And Louis?"

Garreth hesitated. William, once again, moved swift to the mark.

"Come now." William incised him with his gaze. "Surely you have not traveled to Normandy solely for relics and courtesies. You might have wished to evade Raoul's notice as you moved about Francia, but I see no reason for pretense between us now. Besides . . ." William released a breath akin to a sigh. "After spending nigh on to two days in the company of the king's men, I have had quite enough of parrying with words." His eyes bore into Garreth. "Shall we be blunt?"

"As you wish." Garreth felt as though a noose had just been slipped about his neck and tightened.

"Then tell me of the young Carolingian."

"Louis is fine and strong, grown fourteen years into his manhood and waxing impatient to claim his rightful crown," he replied with a directness he believed William sought.

William lifted a golden brow at that. "Then 'tis best Louis exercise prudence and patience a time longer."

Garreth stiffened. "And how much 'longer' might that be, Your Grace?"

"Mayhap months. Mayhap years. Mayhap forever. 'Tis difficult to augur the future in these turbulent times." William began to turn away.

"Maybe not so much so if Louis could depend on the loyalty of those who faithfully served his father."

The duke shot Garreth back a glance. "Charles is dead," he emphasized sternly. "And much has transpired in Francia since that event. Is the whelp anxious to claim a tottery throne only to promptly lose it again? Would Athelstan, in his wisdom, assist his nephew to such a foredoomed fate?"

"With the collective support of his key barons, Louis's throne could be shorn up," Garreth retorted. "'Twould be no need to see it forfeit again."

William barked a laugh. "And who do you believe would be so foolish to hasten to his banner at this time? Hugh? Despite what he might have said to you—and, *oui*, I know you are fresh from Paris and no doubt have spoken with him—nonetheless, Hugh will first and foremost solidify his own holdings, mark my words. Raoul is strong in his power. To whom else may Louis turn? The Lorrainers?" William gave a

snort. “They have neither the numbers nor the strength to support him, and the Acquitainians are in Raoul’s palm. You will not soon find them flocking to Louis’s cause.”

“And what of Normandy?” Garreth pressed, his own choler rising. “Or is Normandy’s duke swayed by the richness of Raoul’s gifts?” He caught William’s eye at that. “You wish to be blunt? The English court is well aware of the recent grant of the Contentin and Avranchin at the time you pledged your oath to Raoul.”

William’s face flushed with anger, and he took a quick pace forward.

“Listen well, Garreth of Tamworth, and impress upon your celebrated sovereign—however you Saxons wish to interpret that particular grant, or my motivations for accepting it—Francia is a much splintered kingdom. She needs no green, untried child-king to challenge the likes of Raoul. The barons of Francia recognize this full well, for their energies are occupied securing their own borders. The time is ill-starred for Louis’s return.”

“And when will it be favorable?”

William offered no response.

“Or will it ever?” Garreth dared, his meaning unmistakable.

William scowled blackly. “Naught binds me to Athelstan. Nor to Louis.”

“Not even the oath of fidelity your father pledged Charles and the honor of Normandy?”

“Charles is dead.”

“Louis is not. Have the Normans in their achievements forgotten they hold their lands of the Carolingians, not of the Robertian usurpers?”

William’s mouth thinned. “Those lands granted at St. Clair-sur-Epte were already in my father’s control *before* the king made his conferral.”

“Rollo might have dominated the land, but he did not create himself duke. That Charles did, ennobling him and raising him to a place within the Frankish aristocracy.”

William did not answer, but turned and directed his gaze out the chamber’s small window. A muscle worked along his jaw. His ire sharpened his features and heightened his color.

“Your father faithfully supported the Carolingians,” Garreth added in a more subdued tone. “Once also did you.”

William paused, then turned slowly round, his eyes unreadable. He held Garreth’s gaze for a moment longer. When he spoke he measured out each word.

“Advise Athelstan—bring back Louis now, or a year from now, and he will not succeed. A Carolingian cannot long hold the throne, with or without my aid. Take a lesson from Hugh. For all the power he wields, he rightly chose to decline the crown. ‘Twould endanger all that he holds to accept it.”

“But if Hugh stands with Louis?”

“Open your eyes and ears, Saxon.” William’s patience burst. “Whatever Hugh might have promised you in secret, he is no fool. Even should he aid Louis’s return, he will guard first what is his, and abet Louis second. Given these times, that support can be only minimal at best.”

Deeming the audience at an end, William crossed the chamber to leave, handing off his goblet to Rurik who yet stood by the portal, having remained there silent and attentive throughout the interview.

“And if the times should change?” Garreth addressed the duke’s retreating back, challenge in his tone.

William halted, then pivoted, fire kindling in the depths of his eyes. Garreth feared he had pressed the duke too far.

“*Should* the time come for Louis’s return, I shall do what I must—for Francia, to be sure, but foremost for Normandy. When you report our conversation to Athelstan, give him to realize that in the breast of William Longsword beats a heart, neither Carolingian nor Robertian, but Norman. And it beats for Normandy.”

With that, William turned on his heel and strode from the chamber.

Garreth clamped his jaw tight and then quit the room as well. Rurik followed, setting aside the goblet on the small table beside the door.

In silence, Garreth and Rurik descended the stairs to the entrance level of the tower keep, then paused atop the outer flight of steps.

Garreth's stomach roiled, upset by the encounter, his nerves scraped raw. He had intended only to test William's bent of mind on the matter of young Louis, not sink into an argument and openly contest him. How had their exchange disintegrated into one of confrontation?

Garreth began to descend the stairs, but Rurik stayed him with a hand to his arm, locking steel-blue eyes with his.

"You might not care for what the duke said just now, but do not discount the validity of his words. My brother Lyting and I fought alongside Charles at Soissons, and I can assure you unseating Raoul will be no easy matter."

By his words, Lord Rurik revealed himself and his brother as Carolingians, giving Garreth one of the answers he sought. He could only wonder that the baron chose to do so.

Lord Rurik continued. "After the recent turmoil in Normandy, William is most interested in solidifying his position and strengthening the duchy from within."

Garreth knew he referred to the revolt of William's barons.

"This colors his view, but his opinion on the matter of the crown is one shared. There is as much upheaval outside of the duchy as within and the other barons must protect their own interests. A Carolingian throne would be too weak to endure."

"And so you also counsel patience for another day?" Garreth felt his spirit deflate a bit further.

Lord Rurik did not answer immediately but measured Garreth behind steel-blue eyes as he considered his next words.

"*Já*. But I would add that William is more like his father than many give credence. When the time comes for Louis's return, I feel certain Duke William Longsword will be at his side and support him fully, all the way to the throne."



At midday, Garreth stood before the iron gates of the church-monastery of St. Ouen.

He tempered his features, knowing they must reflect the dour mood that pervaded his bones. Compelling a smile to his lips, he waited as the spindly Brother Ansfrey bent to the gate's cumbersome lock and worked his key.

With a solid clunk, the mechanism disengaged. Beaming, the monk hauled the gate open against a creaky protest and welcomed Garreth of Tamworth, royal *thegn* and representative of England's great monarch and patron, come to procure the precious Psalter of Metz.

Garreth moderated his pace to match that of Brother Ansfrey as they proceeded toward the complex of monastic buildings and exchanged further cordialities. A blunt pain pulsed to life at Garreth's temples. Try as he might to concentrate on the monk's conversation, a portion of his brain persistently strayed back to his earlier clash with the duke, striving to recapture and dissect every word, look, and gesture.

He felt his smile slip and lifted it back in place, just as he became aware of the approach of another, more sturdy member of the community. This proved to be Abbot Berengar.

Additional greetings and pleasantries flowed while the ache along the sides of Garreth's head spread its fingers upward to his crown.

Ailénor. He must find her, speak with her. Given the troubling outcome of his audience with the duke, Garreth knew he could no longer remain at court. Once he completed the king's business at St. Ouen, he would need to leave Normandy—and Ailénor—and return to England forthwith.

His heart slumped. His head pounded. How could he expl . . . ?

"Come, my son." Abbot Berengar motioned to the ponderous limestone building that hunkered on the path before them, directly ahead. "Twould be our distinct pleasure to guide you through St. Ouen's workshops before we attend to our business."

The churchmen's shining faces mirrored their enthusiasm. Garreth realized he would grievously offend Abbot Berengar and Brother Ansfrey should he decline such a privileged offer and thus allowed them to usher him into the building that, they explained, housed the scriptorium, bindery, and library.

The back of Garreth's mind still churned with possibilities of what he might or might not have said to Duke William when he stepped into the scriptorium, an especially large room, tomblike for its hushed quiet and muted rustlings.

"Here, as you can see, our labors are quite diverse," Brother Ansfrey informed in a voice that was a little above a whisper, gesturing to the workroom with a sweep of his hand.

Crossing to the far end, they watched the brothers finish the preparation of new parchments, pumicing them smooth and chalking them. Garreth gazed on the process attentively, though even as he did, images of Ailénor appeared before his mind's eye and projected themselves against the creamy sheets.

Ailénor in the pear tree, her legs bare to the hips. Ailénor beneath him on the ground, her fiery hair spilled bewitchingly about her.

Ailénor beside him at dinner, laughter shimmering in her eyes.

Ailénor atop her golden courser, riding to the distance, full of life and passion, her shapely form so tantalizingly profiled.

Ailénor . . .

His thoughts deflected against a wall of reality. They would part by sunrise tomorrow, he sailing for England, she remaining in Francia. But he *would* return, he swore to himself. And soon.

An inner voice nettled. He had earned the duke's displeasure this day. Conceivably William would impede his suit for Ailénor's hand. Would her family dismiss him as well? He had sensed no antagonism from Lord Rurik, but what of Ailénor's father, Lord Lyting? The man had watched them both like a hawk last night.

"Here you will see how the leaves are cut to size, then pricked and ruled for the copyists." Abbot Berengar steered them around long worktables, situated in the center of the room where more men bent to their tasks. Finally he brought them to where the scribes, rubricators, and illuminators populated their desks amid scrolls, quills, ink-pots, brushes, and paints.

Garreth watched as one worker scraped an error from the parchment with a small knife and re-inked the letter, but his thoughts continued to flicker back to Ailénor. He must seek her out directly, as soon as he departed the monastery.

Moving on to the bindery, Garreth and his companions made a brief tour and were subsequently greeted in the library by Brother Gilbert. Immediately the monk brought forth a sizable package wrapped in leather. This he placed upon a stand with great care and stepped back, allowing the abbot to uncover the piece.

"Now, my son, gaze for yourself upon the Psalter of Metz."

As he slipped the book from its wrapper, jewels flashed on a ground of gold.

"The cover is called a 'treasure' binding. The plaque, at the center, is of the finest ivory, carved over a century ago at the famed workshops of Metz." He indicated the large inset, a superb relief, depicting Christ in majesty.

Garreth's brows rose. Thoroughly impressed, he gave his attention to the exceptional workmanship.

Abbot Berengar opened the heavy cover, explaining its core to be of beech, the edges beveled and cambered beneath its gold overlay. Turning to an exquisitely decorated leaf, he paused for Garreth's inspection.

"The codex has been painstakingly restored. 'Twas originally inscribed at Metz, but as is sometimes the custom, the work was forwarded to another abbey so that a particular artist might complete the illuminations. In this instance, 'twas the Abbey of Liege and the artist a man named Rimpert.

"Alas." The abbot sighed. "Norsemen ravaged and burnt the abbey some fifty years past. Rimpert fled with the unfinished Psalter and hid it well. Too well, actually. Rimpert died in his flight of the wounds he bore. Only in this last decade has the book been rediscovered. 'Tis a great prize."

Garreth nodded, awed and totally consumed as he scanned the pages, all rendered in neat, uncluttered minuscule, the initial letters elaborate and brightly colored.

At his elbow, Abbot Berengar expounded on how the monks of St. Ouen completed the decorations begun by Rimpert, recopied the damaged leaves, and added their own full-page illuminations, lavishly touched with gold.

For the next hour Garreth studied the dazzling work and more fully appreciated Athelstan's desire to possess it.

"'Tis magnificent," he uttered. "A masterpiece," he pronounced several pages later. "King Athelstan will be highly pleased."

Smiles broke over the monks' faces. Removing the Psalter to Abbot Berengar's office, Garreth settled the king's account. The abbot then insisted they seal their transaction in the cellar with a sampling of Brother Fiacre's superb apple brandy. Garreth found the drink potent but smooth, with a distinctive bite. The first small cup fired a trail from his lips to his heels. The second dissolved the remnants of his headache and replaced it with a pleasant glow.

At the tolling of the abbey bell, Abbot Berengar took leave of Garreth and Brother Ansfrey to say his daily office. Brother Ansfrey, in turn, led Garreth from the cellar depths and directed him to the church, assuming he would wish to see its fine improvements under the Norman dukes and spend time before the altar, praying for safe travel to England.

Passing through a series of connected chambers and the vestry, they emerged at the rear of the church in the central nave. Garreth thanked the good brother a final time and, with the precious Psalter in arm, crossed to the altar.

No sooner had he knelt and closed his eyes than voices drifted to his ears from the front of the church. He tucked his head down to better center his thoughts in prayer, but the high-pitched whisperings of children shattered his concentration.

Casting a glance past his shoulder, his gaze fell immediately upon several young children and two women, clustered to one side at the entrance end and partially obscured by a column. The children he recognized at once, as he did their stern nurse, who stood conversing with one of the brothers, a stack of embroidered altar linens in her arms.

The other woman now moved from the column and into full view, robed in a brilliant green-blue mantle. Though her face remained averted, her deep auburn hair glimpsed from along the edges of her snowy veil. The Baroness de Héricourt, Garreth thought. But looking again and marking her height, he realized with a start 'twas Ailéonor.

His heart jarred in place, and he rose to his feet. Outside the open doors, he spotted Brand and Delling waiting for the women and children, obviously their escorts. He brought his gaze back to Ailéonor, wondering how he might gain her attention and draw her aside. But in that very moment, she turned and glanced toward the altar.

Ailéonor gasped as her gaze collided with his, and he saw her lips form his name.

"Garreth," Ailéonor murmured on a soft breath. Her heart capered. The nave stood empty but an instant ago. From whence did he materialize?

She felt a warm, sweet joy stealing through her as her eyes remained coupled with his. Dear Jesu, but he was a handsome man. She wavered under the intensity of his look, then sent him a smile.

Last evening was one of the happiest she could recall. They had lingered long over their dinner, trading good-humored raillery with her siblings and cousins, then dallied over *merles* for hours more, rapt with each other's company and forgetting their "guardians" who dwindled away one by one. Ailéonor recognized she must possess a wanton side for she fervently hoped Garreth and she might again share a trencher and the evening hours that lay ahead. Would that they could find a small space of time to themselves, apart from the eyes of so many.

Ailéonor collected herself, remembering the children and Felise, who was now debating the best methods for removing stains from altar cloths with Brother Eustache.

Ailéonor excused herself on the pretext of going to light a devotional candle before the statue of the Virgin. Traversing the nave to the side chapel, she brushed gazes with Garreth as she went, her pulse accelerating, and prayed he would join her.

Ailéonor flamed a candle and waited. Moments later she perceived Garreth's presence towering behind her. A thrilling, vibrating sensation spangled through her at his closeness and settled low in her abdomen. Her every nerve stood on end, sensually aware of him.

Turning, she cast up a sunny glance only to meet with his somber expression, a touch of sadness in his face. Her smile faltered.

“Ailénor—” He hesitated, then his gaze traveled over her face, as if tracing her features to memory. “My business in Rouen is at an end.” Again he paused, seeming to search for words. A muscle leapt in his jaw. “On the morrow I must sail at first light.”

Ailénor’s smile slipped from her lips and fell to the floor of her heart. All gladness left her. She bit the inside of her cheek against a sudden rush of emotion.

“‘Twould seem you are to leave my life as abruptly as you entered it,” she offered in a small, dry voice, attempting a smile but failing miserably.

“Not by choice.” Garreth lifted a hand to stroke back a wayward strand of hair from her cheek. “Ailénor, I would not leave so soon if matters were otherwise. Believe that.”

She caught her bottom lip with her teeth, the hopes and fantasies concealed in her maiden’s heart crumbling. “There is only this day left to us, then?”

Garreth bowed his head. “Not even that. I must arrange my passage and make the necessary preparations. I regret I shall be unable to join you in the hall this eve.”

An unseen hand squeezed her heart, “Am I never to see you again?” Unexpected tears pricked the back of her eyes.

Garreth closed the space between them and pressed a finger to her lips. “Never is a harsh word, fair Ailénor, and one I refuse to use where it concerns the two of us.”

She trembled beneath his touch and wondered at his words. His hand dropped and enclosed hers in its warmth. He began to speak again, but the children’s voices sounded their approach—Adelis’s, Michan’s, and Ena’s—reminding them they were not alone.

Garreth drew Ailénor over to one of the church’s lofty columns. He could not give her up to the others yet. Their time was near to an end. One last moment must be theirs. He continued to enfold her hand in his own, his other arm still encumbered with the heavy Psalter. His gaze poured over her, hot, consuming.

“The children . . .” Ailénor fretted as they neared.

“Here. Look to examine this.” Garreth placed the Psalter in her hands, unable to think of aught else he might do. Aiding Ailénor, he helped brace the book’s weight from beneath, but did not move to withdraw the leather wrappings.

Again his gaze spilled over her. How could he leave her when everything in him clamored to stay? And yet he must. He could not reveal those things yet hidden about himself. Not at this time.

Beneath the Psalter, Garreth’s hand slipped over Ailénor’s. He believed her discontent to be as great as his, for she wore her heart in her eyes.

“‘Tis my most ardent wish to return to you, sweet Ailénor. I vow, to that end I shall faithfully strive.”

Mayhap ‘twas the moisture that glistened in her eyes and so tore at his heart, or mayhap the brothers’ fine brandy that prompted him to boldness, but he knew he could not depart Normandy without seeing her again.

“If ‘tis in your heart, then meet me on the morrow, before I sail.” His mind rapidly cast about for a place where they might do so, near to the keep.

Ailénor’s free hand sought his beneath the book. “*Oui*, Garreth. At the stone bench in the rose garden.”

“The stone bench,” he repeated, the corners of his mouth lifting. “‘Twould please me greatly if you would grant me your token then. I shall carry it with me, until again we meet.”

Ailénor nodded, a single tear slipping from her eye. His heart compressed, stirring Garreth to draw one of her hands from beneath the Psalter and press his lips against its back.

Ailénor swayed toward him, pressing into the edge of the book, a cumbersome barrier. He raised his head to gaze on her, but heard a shuffling accompanied by a distinctive “mew” nearby.

Garreth and Ailénor glanced down in unison to find young Michan sitting on the floor next to the stand of candles, his hand tucked inside the pouch at his waist where white fur and a small pink nose

peeked out. How long the child had watched them, he could not guess, but Garreth pulled Ailénor along with him, behind the column and out of sight.

“Wait for me, Ailénor.” He spoke in a rush, knowing their time had run dry. “I pray God returns me swiftly to your arms. Know I will do all in my power to hasten that day.”

Encircling her with his arm, he drew her to him, the Psalter folding between them. He covered her mouth with his and kissed her deeply, urgently. His fingers pressed against her spine, then slid upward to tangle in her hair and send her veil askew.

Beneath Garreth’s searing lips, Ailénor felt a fire ignite inside her and flame upward, bright and white-hot. She met his passion and answered it fully, her mouth parting beneath his. She jolted momentarily at the invasion of his tongue, then welcomed its questing, silken warmth. Their breaths mingled, their tongues mated and danced, scandalously, passionately, their fervid kiss becoming one of longing and parting and bittersweet anguish.

Footsteps echoed across the nave, rupturing their passion-clogged haze. Garreth released her, and they panted for breath.

“Until the dawn, my heart. His dark eyes shone with unspoken emotion.

Seizing a final kiss, hard and swift, he unloosed his hold on her, pivoted, and left, leaving her tottery and groping for the solidity of the column.

Garreth crossed the nave in long, rapid strides, nodding tersely to the monk and Felise whose brows flew upward at his sudden appearance, while the children chattered amongst themselves.

Ailénor watched Garreth pass out of the church, her heart pounding, her lips burning. The force of her newly awakened desires and her hunger for Garreth startled her. No promise lay beyond tomorrow, yet she knew she would wait for him.

“Until the dawn,” she whispered after him as he disappeared from sight.



Ailénor rose in the early-morning dark.

Drawing on her gown and slippers, she made her way around the pallets of her cousins and retrieved her mantle from its peg on the wall.

Cloaking herself, she moved into the outer chamber where Felise slept deeply with the young ones, her soft snores filling the air. Soundlessly Ailénor crossed to the door and emerged onto the upper gallery that overlooked the Great Hall.

Following the passageway to the far end, she gained the stairs and began her descent. Torches blazed in their iron brackets, spilling gamboling pools of light over the steps and distending shadows to dance upon the walls.

Reaching the bottom, she paused in the alcove and peered through the archway, into the Great Hall. Her heart beat high in her chest. With so many guests at the palace, she feared some might sleep in the hall. Unable to distinguish forms in the inky darkness there, and not wishing to chance discovery, she continued on toward the entrance end, keeping close to the wall.

She hesitated. Never had she wandered the keep at night, but guessed there to be guards posted throughout. Likely before the portal to the Great Hall itself. Certainly on the level below that quartered the high-ranking *chevaliers*. And without doubt, outside, securing the main stairway to the keep.

Diverting her course, Ailénor followed the partition of curtained columns, paused long enough to look about for men-at-arms, then, finding none, dashed the distance to the entrance of the kitchen passage.

With a sigh of relief, she quickened her pace along the corridor and closed on two sets of stairs, one leading to the wine cellar, the other to the kitchens that lay just outside the tower keep. She hastened down the latter, her anticipation mounting. ‘Twould be a matter of minutes before she reached the garden and Garreth.

Rounding the steps at their turn, her gaze fell to the bottom of the steps. She froze in place. A guard stood below, his back confronting her. How could she hope to steal past him?

The man bent his head forward and appeared to speak to someone, hidden before his bulk. Ailénor’s eyes widened as a feminine hand slid around his waist and began to caress his back. At that

encouragement, he ushered his companion into an adjoining storage room that projected off the corridor and closed the door.

A part of Ailéonor wished to rail at the man for abandoning his post. Another part praised Heaven above for his timeliness, which opened her way to slip from the keep unseen. Rushing down the remainder of the steps, she escaped outside and into the yard.

Servants stirred about the kitchen buildings, laying in the fires and beginning preparations of the keep's main meal that would be served at ten.

A man bearing firewood to one kitchen halted outside the door and stared pointedly at her. Again Ailéonor feared discovery. Yet there was something in his look that chilled her blood. Or was it his pock-scarred face that so disquieted her?

Ailéonor upbraided herself for her narrowness of spirit. She broke the gaze and headed in the direction of the garden, persuading herself she need not worry. Servants might gossip among themselves, but their buzzings usually stayed within their own ranks. She highly doubted the man would inform the officials of the keep or seek out her parents, even if he knew who they might be.

Drawing into her green-blue mantle, cocooning herself against her unease, Ailéonor continued to the arbor.

A fine mist hugged the ground, dampening Ailéonor's slippers and the hems of her cloak and gown. Entering the low-walled garden, she found it empty. She had left her chamber somewhat early to arrive in advance of Garreth. With that achieved, she now found herself hoping that he would arrive directly and undelayed.

Ailéonor paced the confines of the garden restlessly, then seated herself on the cold stone bench. The early-morning chill seeped into her bones.

Somewhere behind, a twig snapped, causing her to jump. She scanned the area but found nothing. A bird fluttered into a tree nearby and began to chirp out a melody—a mockingbird, reciting his lengthy repertoire. He finished a flourish of notes, then switched abruptly to a discordant cawing, as though to drive her from the garden or warn her away.

Ailéonor pulled her mantle snug about her and rubbed warmth into her arms. "Garreth," she whispered. Did aught detain him? Had something occurred since yestereve to prevent his coming this morn?

Ailéonor touched her fingers to her lips, remembering his kiss and the heat of his mouth, and how he called her "his heart."

Above, the sky began to lift from a pitch-black to a deep, lambent blue. Of a sudden, Garreth's request for a token leapt to mind. Ailéonor meant to gift him with a particular ring, but in her eagerness to meet him, she forgot to retrieve it from her chest. And yet . . .

She fingered the brooch securing her mantle. 'Twas a fine piece and a worthy token. She smiled. Working the pin at its back, she unfastened it and slid it from the cloth.

Ailéonor started to secure the pin when she heard distinctive sounds, just past her right shoulder and directly behind—footfalls and a swishing of cloth. Ice shot up her spine, instinct telling her 'twas not Garreth. The mockingbird flew past, forsaking the garden. Ailéonor shoved from the bench but had only half risen when a hand snaked from behind and fastened over her mouth.

A scream scaled Ailéonor's throat. She tore at the hand and battled the solid strength that forced her back down. In a panic she fought beneath the entrapping hands, twisting violently as she lurched forward and partially freed herself. Driving upward, she regained her footing. Yet her attacker overpowered her efforts and caught her in a crushing grip, one hand still affixed over her mouth.

Twisting, she caught sight of the man's pocked face. Her heart nearly stopped beating. Another form materialized, seemingly from nowhere, and grabbed for her legs.

Terror possessed Ailéonor. She kicked out. Remembering the brooch in her palm, she hardened her grip and stabbed backward, sinking its long pin into the thigh of the man who held her. He shouted and swore blackly, then, in a fit of anger, struck the brooch from her hand, sending it into the grass. The two men trammelled her next efforts and hauled her toward a hedge of bushes, terrifying her nearly beyond her senses. Would they rape her right here?

Garreth! Garreth! Her mind screamed out to him.

Ailénor fought with all her remaining strength but to no avail. Her cloak dropped from her shoulders and snarled at her feet. The morning cool rushed over her as she bit and kicked, and scratched. Tearing one hand free, she clawed for the man's face. He snared her wrist and gave it a twist, but in the struggle her knee jerked upward and connected with his groin, shocking herself and incensing him. Fury fired his eyes. Doubling back his fist, he struck out.

Pain exploded along Ailénor's jaw, while her head burst with a brilliant shattering of light. Crumpling, she fell into a well of darkness.



Grimbold worked quickly to bind the baroness's hands and gag her. He had not anticipated so much pluck or fight from a noblewoman. He smiled darkly. She should make for some stimulating sport.

"Help me with this," he barked at Wimund.

Together they pulled a hemp sack over her, one of size, filched from the kitchen. Enshrouding her fully, they hauled her upward.

"Get the cart and meet me at the west gate," Grimbold ordered.

Wimund started to argue the arrangement, but harnessed his tongue and trudged off.

Shouldering the baroness's unconscious form, Grimbold took up her weight and vanished into the shadows that yet lingered before the dawn.



Garreth quickened his stride toward the garden, eager to see Ailénor. Eager to hold her in his arms and claim one last kiss before he took leave of her for England.

Entering the rose arbor, he found no sign of Ailénor. All lay still and silent.

Garreth removed the cumbrous Psalter from beneath his arm and placed it on the stone bench in the heart of the garden. He stood waiting, watching. His nerves knotted up.

As loath as he was to leave Ailénor, he found himself anxious to be away so he might return all the sooner. More strongly than ever, he felt sure of his intentions, sure of his feelings, for the autumn-fire maid of Normandy. If the king would have him choose a wife, he would choose Ailénor. Even if the king did not urge him to the altar, 'twas a journey he would gladly embrace with this fair damsel.

Pale fingers of pink and lavender streaked the sky. Still Ailénor did not appear. Tension coiled through Garreth. The boatswain would not delay the ship for long, he had made himself clear. Even now Garreth knew he must hasten his pace to the docks.

Young Michan came to mind. Yesterday in the church the boy overheard the details of his and Ailénor's plans. Had the lad informed his nursemaid? Or his parents? Had they prevented Ailénor from coming this morn?

Garreth's heart plummeted.

He doubted not at all her feelings toward him, not if he judged by her passionate response beneath his kiss yesterday. How keenly he wished to see her before his leave-taking.

Long minutes passed while the sky continued to lighten. He could wait no longer. He did not have time to seek her out, and disappointment weighted his chest like granite. Until he returned to Francia, he would neither see Ailénor again nor have further communication with her.

Taking up the Psalter, he withdrew from the garden and crossed the ducal grounds. At the gate Garreth identified himself to the guards, completed the formalities, then gave a single glance back toward the tower keep.

Ailénor. Where are you? he reached out to her mentally. Only the quiet of early morn and a few twittering birds answered back.

Releasing a long, frustrated breath, he directed himself to the demands of the day that lay ahead and forced himself to depart.



Garreth arrived at the dock to find the boatswain pacing the planking. Seeing Garreth, the man hurried forward.

“All is in readiness. Your trunk arrived earlier and is stowed aboard.”

The boatswain twitched several glances back to the ship and licked his dry lips.

“We . . . ah . . . have some unanticipated company for the crossing—two men bound for Ireland. ‘Twill not delay you one whit, I assure you,” he added in a rush. “They paid right handsomely, they did, and extra, too. But I made it clear to ‘em both I’d first be delivering you to Hamwih. They have no problem with that.”

Garreth flicked a glance at the men who waited in the ship, drawn into their cloaks and hoods. In truth, he had paid quite handsomely himself for a swift and direct passage, convincing the boatswain to forgo all stops save the requisite one on the coast at Harfleur.

“Then I have no problem either,” he muttered in assent, his greater concern still residing with Ailéonor.

Climbing into the ship, he afforded the men a nod, then stepped to the cargo hold where the decking opened to the hull amidship. Casks of ale and provisions of food crowded the mast there, while the remainder of the space was only partially loaded. Garreth spied his chest positioned beneath the foredecking. It struck him as odd that it should be stored apart of the other goods, but he leapt down the short distance, thinking to store the Psalter there as well and protect it from the elements at sea.

As he squatted before the trunk, he heard a scuffing of boots on the deck astern, but paid it little thought. Instead he slipped the precious book in its waterproof wrappings behind the trunk. He encountered something there, firm but with “give.” He noticed the end of a hemp sack then. Grain? he wondered. Again he deemed it odd but thought whatever the sack contained, ‘twould buffer the Psalter nicely and keep it from sliding about.

Rising Garreth found the two men watching him from deep within their hoods. One had stood to his feet and now stared down at him. Garreth felt a prickling feeling dance along the back of his neck. There was something odd about the man’s eyes, yet the shadows obscured them.

Garreth gave another slight nod of the head, then joined the two on the half deck astern and settled himself where he could keep his valuables in view.

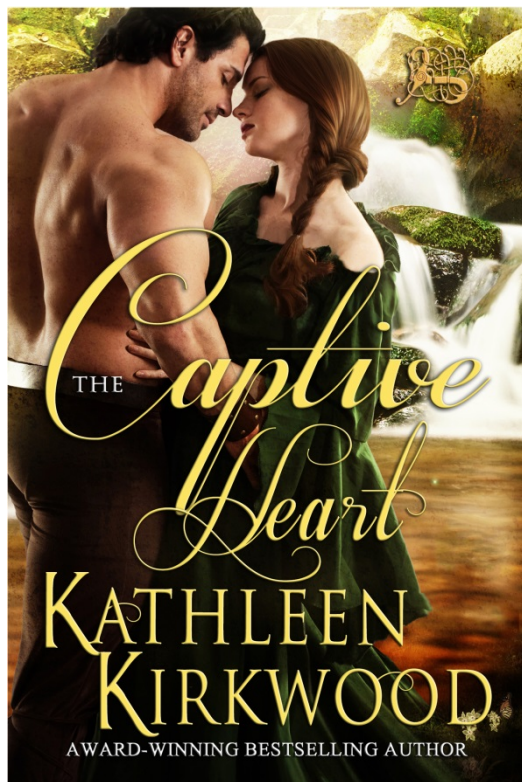
The boatswain cast off the mooring lines and trimmed the sail to take advantage of the light breeze.

As the ship glided from port, Garreth looked back to Rouen and the distant tower keep, outlined against the hills. There his gaze remained as the expanse steadily widened between himself and the maid who had so captured his heart.

End of Sample

The Story Continues!

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The Captive Heart

by

Kathleen Kirkwood

Author Biography



Kathleen Kirkwood is the pseudonym for award-winning, best-selling author Anita Gordon. She is the recipient of the Romance Writers of America's 1989 Golden Heart Award and winner of RWA's Desert Rose Chapter's 2002 Golden Quill Award, among other honors and recognitions. Having an abiding love for history, she enjoys setting her stories in distant times and places long past. They include a Viking Age trilogy (writing as Anita Gordon), plus other Medieval adventures and Late Victorian paranormal romances - Time Travel and ghosts (writing as Kathleen Kirkwood). Recently, she and her husband returned to the southwest, where they first met at college. Currently, she is dusting off and revising her backlist for release in digital and print format, bringing them all together under her "Kathleen Kirkwood" pen name. The first two books of the Viking Age "HEART" trilogy, *THE VALIANT HEART* and *THE DEFIANT HEART* were released in May and June of 2013. The third book, *THE CAPTIVE HEART* will be released in July of 2013. Her other works, *SHADES OF THE PAST*, *A SLIP IN TIME* and *HIS FAIR LADY* were released in 2012. She will next turn her attention to a haunting tale set on the Chesapeake Bay and the shores of historic Southern Maryland. Look for updates on *PIRATES' MOON*. at her website: www.KathleenKirkwoodHistoricals.com. For a behind the scenes look at the creation of these works, drop by her blog at: www.KathleenKirkwood.blogspot.com.

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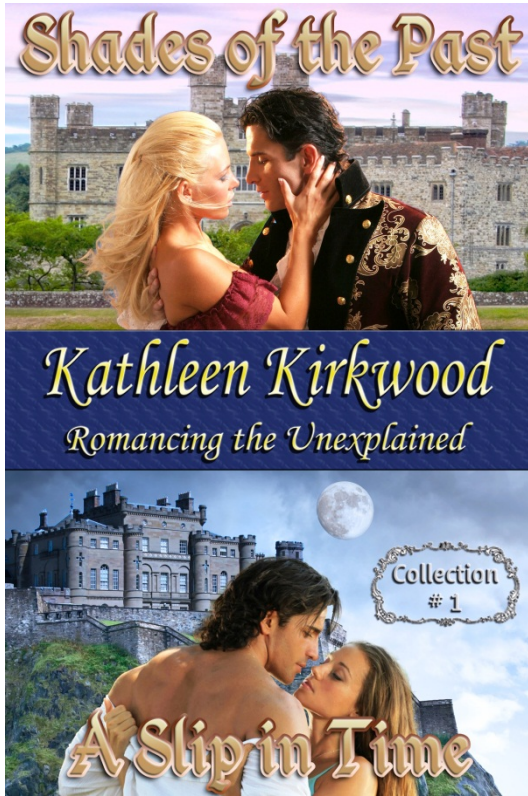


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